

*A Finland*

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## **Fit for Children**

*The National Finnish Plan of Action called for by  
the Special Session on Children of the UN General Assembly*



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## Summary

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*A Finland Fit for Children. The National Finnish Plan of Action called for by the Special Session on Children of the UN General Assembly. Helsinki 2005, 72 pp. (Publications of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, Finland, ISSN 1236-2050; 2005:7) ISBN 952-00-1711-9 (print), ISBN 952-00-1712-7 (PDF)*

A Finland Fit for Children is the National Plan of Action that is based on the final document, A World Fit for Children, adopted at the Special Session on Children of the UN General Assembly in May 2002. The Plan of Action was prepared by the Finnish National Committee on the Rights of the Child set up by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health in spring 2003. In it the National Committee highlights issues of topical interest regarding the living conditions of children and families with children in Finland.

The National Committee is of the opinion that Finland needs a comprehensive and jointly agreed national child and family policy strategy for developing and monitoring the wellbeing of children and families with children. Issues that should be taken up in it are meeting the best interests and needs of the children, and securing adequate services and economic resources for families.

The National Committee stresses that the child's best interests shall be taken into account in society's all measures and decisions affecting children. Therefore they should be assessed from the point of view of the child's best interests. The Committee has drawn up a model for the assessment of child-related consequences of society's actions and decisions, and recommends that it should be tried out and further developed.

The Committee underlines that child upbringing and providing for children's wellbeing are the foremost responsibilities of the parents. Society must with its decisions and actions clearly signal that it supports families in this task. Parents need the support of the primary services for parenting and for their mutual relationship, and in particular the communality provided by parents' peer groups. It is also important to provide families with better opportunities for reconciling family and work.

In its recommendations the Committee further suggests that children's opportunities for participation should be improved, the responsibility of the media regarding children's safety should be increased, children's wellbeing should be monitored more effectively, the awareness of the rights of the child should be promoted, and the children's point of view should be taken into account in development co-operation as well.

The Plan of Action A Finland Fit for Children supplements with its recommendations the content and implementation of the existing national plans and programmes of action, such as the plan for early childhood education and care, the curriculum for the comprehensive school, the guide and quality recommendations for school health care, and the guide meant for staff working at the municipal child health clinics.

**Key words:** assessments, child policy, children, family policy, international co-operation, rights of the child, UN

## Tiivistelmä

*Lapsille sopiva Suomi. YK:n yleiskokouksen lasten erityisistunnon edellyttämä Suomen kansallinen toimintasuunnitelma. Helsinki. 2005. 72 s. (Sosiaali- ja terveysministeriön julkaisuja, ISSN 1236-2050; 2005:7) ISBN 952-00-1711-9 (nid.), ISBN 952-1712-7 (PDF)*

Lapsille sopiva Suomi on sosiaali- ja terveysministeriön keväällä 2003 asettaman Suomen lapsiasiain toimikunnan laatima kansallinen toimintasuunnitelma, joka pohjaa YK:n yleiskokouksen lasten erityisistunnossa toukokuussa vuonna 2002 hyväksyttyyn loppuasiakirjaan, A World Fit for Children. Toimintasuunnitelmassa toimikunta nostaa esiin lasten ja lapsiperheiden elinoloissa ajankohtaisiksi katsomiaan kysymyksiä Suomessa.

Toimikunnan mielestä Suomeen tarvitaan laaja ja yhteisesti hyväksytty valtakunnallinen lapsi- ja perhepoliittinen strategia lasten ja lapsiperheiden hyvinvoinnin kehittämiseksi ja seuraamiseksi. Siinä tulee ottaa huomioon sekä lapsen edun ja tarpeiden toteutuminen että perheiden palveluiden ja taloudellisten voimavarojen turvaaminen.

Toimikunta korostaa, että kaikissa yhteiskunnan toimenpiteissä ja päätöksissä, jotka koskevat lapsia, on otettava huomioon lapsen etu. Siksi yhteiskunnan toimia ja päätöksiä tulee arvioida lapsen edun kannalta. Lapsiasiain toimikunta on laatinut lapsivaikutusten arviointia varten mallin, jota se suosittelee kokeiltavaksi ja edelleen kehitettäväksi.

Toimikunta painottaa, että lasten kasvatuksesta ja hyvinvoinnista huolehtiminen on vanhempien tärkein tehtävä. Yhteiskunnan tulee omilla päätöksillään ja toimillaan antaa selkeä viesti siitä, että se tukee perheitä tässä tehtävässä. Vanhemmat tarvitsevat peruspalveluiden antamaa tukea vanhemmuuteen ja parisuhteeseen ja erityisesti vanhempien vertaisryhmien tarjoamaa yhteisöllisyyttä. Mahdollisuus perheen ja työelämän nykyistä parempaan yhteensovittamiseen on myös lapsiperheille erittäin tärkeää.

Toimikunta esittää suosituksissaan myös lasten osallistumisoikeuksien toteutumisen parantamista, median vastuun lisäämistä lasten turvallisuudesta, lasten hyvinvoinnin nykyistä tehokkaampaa seurantaa, lapsen oikeuksien tunnettuuden parantamista sekä lapsen näkökulman huomioon ottamista myös kehitysyhteistyössä.

Lapsille sopiva Suomi -toimintasuunnitelma täydentää suosituksillaan olemassa olevien kansallisten toimintaohjelmien ja -suunnitelmien kuten varhaiskasvatuksen suunnitelman perusteiden, peruskoulun opetussuunnitelman perusteiden, kouluterveydenhuollon oppaan ja laatusuosituksen sekä lastenneuvolan työntekijöille suunnatun oppaan sisältöä ja toimeenpanoa.

**Asiasanat:** arviointi, kansainvälinen yhteistyö, lapsen oikeudet, lapset, lapsipolitiikka, perhepolitiikka, toimintasuunnitelmat, YK

## Sammandrag

*Ett Finland för barnen. Finlands nationella handlingsplan som förutsätts av FN:s generalförsamlings specialsession om barn. Helsingfors, 2005. 72 s. (Social- och hälsovårdsministeriets publikationer, ISSN 1236-2050; 2005:7) ISBN 952-00-1711-9 (inh.), ISBN 952-00-1712-7 (PDF)*

Ett Finland för barnen är en nationell handlingsplan av Kommissionen för barnfrågor i Finland tillsatt av social- och hälsovårdsministeriet våren 2003. Planen baseras på slutdokumentet A World Fit for Children som FN:s generalförsamling antog vid specialsessionen om barn i maj år 2002. I handlingsplanen lyfter kommissionen fram frågor som den anser vara aktuella när det gäller barnens och barnfamiljernas levnadsförhållanden i Finland.

Enligt kommissionen behövs det i Finland en bred och gemensamt antagen riksfattande barn- och familjepolitisk strategi för utveckling och uppföljning av barnens och barnfamiljernas välbefinnande. I strategin bör man både beakta barnets bästa och behov och säkerställa tjänster och ekonomiska resurser för familjer.

Kommissionen betonar att man vid alla åtgärder och beslut i samhället som gäller barn måste beakta barnets bästa. Därför bör samhällets åtgärder och beslut utvärderas utifrån barnets intressen. Kommissionen för barnfrågor har utarbetat en modell för analys av barnkonsekvenser och rekommenderar att den provas och vidareutvecklas.

Kommissionen betonar att föräldrarnas viktigaste uppgift är att ansvara för barnens uppföstran och välbefinnande. Samhället bör genom sina egna beslut och åtgärder ge en klar signal om att det stöder familjerna i denna uppgift. Föräldrarna behöver det stöd för föräldraskap och parförhållande som basservicen ger och särskilt den gemenskap som grupper av likställda erbjuder. Att kunna förena familj och arbetsliv bättre än idag är också mycket viktigt för barnfamiljer.

I sina rekommendationer lägger kommissionen även fram ett förslag om förbättrat genomförande av barnens rätt att delta, ökat ansvar för barnens säkerhet inom media, mer effektiv uppföljning av barnens välbefinnande, förbättrad kännedom om barnens rättigheter samt att man beaktar barnens synvinkel även i utvecklingssamarbete.

Handlingsplanen Ett Finland för barnen kompletterar med sina rekommendationer innehållet i och verkställandet av existerande nationella verksamhetsprogram och -planer såsom grunderna för förskoleundervisningens läroplan, grunderna för läroplanen för den grundläggande utbildningen, handboken och kvalitetsrekommendationerna för skolhälsovården samt handboken för arbetstagarna vid rådgivningsbyråer för barnavård.

**Nyckelord:** barn, barnets rättigheter, barnpolitik, familjepolitik, FN, internationellt samarbete, utvärdering, verksamhetsplaner

## Contents

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Foreword	7
1. Background	10
2. Finnish National Committee on the Rights of the Child	12
3. UN Convention on the Rights of the Child	14
4. A Finland Fit for Children — the National Plan of Action	17
4.1 Vision of the Plan of Action	17
4.2 Goals of the Plan of Action	20
Goal 1. The child receives love and care at home	20
Goal 2. The child has safe and long-lasting relationships and an environment that reinforces a sense of security	26
Goal 3. The child has the basic and special services he or she needs and guaranteed income	33
Goal 4. The child enjoys increased participation in everyday situations	42
Goal 5. The rights of the child are widely known	47
4.3 Child impact assessment	52
5. Recommendations for action and ideas for development	58
Sources	66
Annexes	
Annex 1. UN Convention on the Rights of the Child	68
Annex 2. Children's Parliament and Open Youth Forum in Tampere	70
Annex 3. Checklist for assessing the realization of children's rights	72

## Foreword

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*A Finland Fit for Children* is the National Finnish Plan of Action based on the final document, *A World Fit for Children*, adopted at the Special Session on Children of the UN General Assembly in May 2002. The Plan of Action was prepared by the Finnish National Committee on the Rights of the Child set up by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health in spring 2003. In it the National Committee highlights issues of topical interest related to the living conditions of children and families with children in Finland. The choice of focus points derives not only from the final document but also from the comments returned by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on Finland's second regular report on implementation of the rights of the child (2000), on Finland's third regular report (2003) and on various issues considered important by the Finnish National Committee on the Rights of the Child. The point of view of the child has been the guiding principle in drawing up the Plan.

The National Committee is of the opinion that Finland needs a comprehensive and jointly agreed national child and family policy strategy for developing and monitoring the wellbeing of children and families with children. Issues that should be taken up in this strategy are ways of meeting the best interests and needs of the children and securing adequate services and economic resources for families. The national strategy should contain a section on child policy based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a section on family policy outlining how to ensure subsistence, and a section on the wellbeing of and services aimed at children and families. The Government's family policy strategy should be drawn up as a broad-based child and family policy programme. In order for child and family policy to be effective, up-to-date information on the wellbeing of and services aimed at children and families must be available.

The wellbeing of children is the responsibility of all administrative sectors. Thus, the National Committee feels that coordination of child and family matters in public administration should be improved. The Committee submitted a separate proposal in 2004 concerning the appointment of an Ombudsman for Children and the coordination of child and family matters.<sup>1</sup> Parliament approved the Act on the Ombudsman for Children in December 2004, and the first national Ombudsman for Children in Finland will take office on 1 Septem-

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<sup>1</sup> Finnish National Committee on the Rights of the Child. Proposal on the Ombudsman for Children and on coordination in children's and family matters. Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. Working group memos 2004:7.

ber 2005. The National Committee hopes that the Ombudsman will be able to influence the development of national child and family policy and to promote the viewpoint of the rights and interests of the child in public decision-making. The Ombudsman also has an important task in improving awareness of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. A national communications strategy should be drawn up for this purpose.

The National Committee stresses that the child's best interests must be taken into account in all of society's actions and decisions affecting children, without limiting this requirement to the actions of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, or indeed of the authorities in general. Taking the child's point of view into account in society and building a more child-friendly Finland requires all those involved to take the best interests of the child into account. Practical decisions are crucial in this respect. The Committee feels that in practice the best interests of the child are not always served, for instance when decisions on custody and taking into care are made, regardless of what the legislation provides for. Also, all measures and decisions in society should be assessed from the point of view of the child's best interests. The Committee has drawn up a model for the assessment of child-related consequences of society's actions and decisions, or child impact assessment, and recommends that it should be tried out and further developed.

The Committee underlines that child upbringing and provision for children's wellbeing are the foremost responsibilities of the parents. Public decisions and actions must clearly signal that society supports families in this task. Parents need the support of basic services in their parenting and their mutual relationship, as well as various channels for early support and help. Today, families with children particularly need the communality provided by parents' peer groups. The child also needs caring adults who can give a sense of security. The collective responsibility of the community for its children needs to be improved.

Appreciation of family life in society should be enhanced. Improving the conditions of parents also means that working life should provide families with better opportunities for reconciling family and work. Children and adolescents need more time to be with their parents. The media, in their many forms, are a strong presence in the life of a child today. The responsibility for protecting the child and bringing him up to be critical and media-literate must be taken seriously.

Children and adolescents have little scope for participation, usually due to the attitudes of adults. The National Committee consulted children and adolescents in Tampere in the course of its work. The interviewees considered shared family time, everyday work and good relations between pupils and teachers, on the one hand, and schools and homes, on the other, to be important. They expressed a wish for more pupil representation and participation in schools. They felt that advertising had a detrimental effect, particularly on



small children, although advertising was also considered a channel for promoting valid and important matters.

The aim of the National Plan of Action, *A Finland Fit for Children*, is to promote the enhancement of children's wellbeing in Finland. Its recommendations supplement the content and implementation of existing national plans and programmes of action, such as the National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland, the National Curriculum Guidelines for Comprehensive Education, the guide and quality recommendations for school health care, and the guide meant for staff working at municipal child health clinics.

The National Committee proposes that the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health incorporate the recommendations of *A Finland Fit for Children* into development projects on safeguarding the future of the national health care and social welfare sector currently being processed at the Ministry, particularly the child welfare and family policy programmes now in preparation. The Committee further proposes that *A Finland Fit for Children* be appended to the regular report to be submitted by Finland to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child. The Plan is further expected to serve as a tool for Finland's first Ombudsman for Children, who is to take up office in 2005. The Committee also notes that Finland should promote implementation of the rights of the child and children's wellbeing worldwide through international cooperation.

The Committee proposes that the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health should manage the forwarding of the Plan to UNICEF and the reporting on it. The Committee considers it particularly important for all actors in every administrative sector of central and local government, the public sector, NGOs, volunteers and the church to take the recommendations of the Plan into account in their work and promote their realization in Finland.

Helsinki, 31 March 2005

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## 1. Background

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The Special Session on Children of the UN General Assembly in May 2002 adopted the final document *A World Fit for Children*. The document consists of a Declaration and a Plan of Action whose main aims are to promote children's health, to provide education, to protect children from abuse, violence and exploitation, and to combat HIV and AIDS. The Special Session was also the ten-year follow-up meeting of the Children's Summit of 1990. The Member States of the UN undertook that they would each create a National Plan of Action based on the aims of the final document adopted at the Special Session, which would define national goals and strategies. The National Finnish Plan of Action, *A Finland Fit for Children*, was drawn up by the Finnish National Committee on the Rights of the Child appointed by the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health.

*A Finland Fit for Children* is based on the care and upbringing that Finnish children need. However, instead of covering all aspects of a child's life, the Plan highlights current problems and shortcomings. The point of view of the child has been the guiding principle in drawing up the Plan.

The Plan is based on the conclusions drawn and shortcomings noted by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child concerning Finland's second regular report (October 2000). The background material to the Plan also includes Finland's third regular report (2003) on implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Government report on the wellbeing of children and adolescents (2002) and, related to this, the report *Mikä lapsiamme uhkaa?* (What threatens our children, 2001) by the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES). The Plan is further based on the principal shortcomings in the status of children identified and recommendations made by the National Committee. (Convention on the Rights of the Child, Annex 1.)

*A Finland Fit for Children* presents a model on how to assess the impact of decisions on children. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommends that countries which have ratified the Convention should perform a child impact assessment on all decisions affecting children. However, the Committee has not issued any instructions or models on how to perform such assessments.

The participation of children and adolescents in preparation of the Plan was ensured in cooperation with the Children's Parliament organized by the City of Tampere (90 representatives at the meeting on 10 November 2004) and the Open Youth Forum (53 representatives at the meeting on 11 November

2004). Children from Tampere were chosen because Tampere was the first local authority in Finland to found a post of municipal Ombudsman for Children, in 2003. The Children's Parliament and the Open Youth Forum discussed issues related to the goals of the Plan. The City Ombudsman for Children, Taru Kuosmanen, summarized the discussions. (Outline of the Children's Parliament and Open Youth Forum, Annex 2.)



## **2. Finnish National Committee on the Rights of the Child**

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In accordance with the final document of the Special Session, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health on 21 March 2003 appointed a broad-based Finnish National Committee on the Rights of the Child, with an Executive Committee, both representing considerable social expertise, to sit for the period 1 March 2003 to 31 March 2005. The duties of this Committee included:

1. managing publicity for the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child;
2. acting as the national body specified by the UN Special Session on Children;
3. preparing the National Finnish Plan of Action based on *A World Fit for Children*;
4. organizing and coordinating the participation of children and adolescents in preparation of the Plan;
5. preparing measures for the tenth anniversary of the UN Year of the Family; and
6. making a submission on the establishment of one or more permanent national bodies to coordinate child and family matters.

The Committee was chaired by Eva Biaudet MP, with Deputy Head of Department Riitta Viitala of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health as deputy chair. The Committee members were Head of Unit Kirsti Aarnio (until 31 August 2004) and Head of Unit Tarja Reponen (from 1 September 2004) of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs; Legislative Counsellor Markku Helin of the Ministry of Justice; Cultural Counsellor Kimmo Aaltonen of the Ministry of Education; Director Matti Salmenperä of the Ministry of Labour; Senior Researcher Jyri Juslén of the Ministry of the Environment; Provincial Welfare Inspector Toivo Haataja of the State Provincial Office of Southern Finland; Senior Research Officer Marja Kuhmonen of the State Provincial Office of Eastern Finland; Governor Eino Siuruainen of the State Provincial Office of Oulu; Governor Hannele Pokka of the State Provincial Office of Lapland; Director of Division Sirpa Taskinen of the National Research and Development Centre for Welfare and Health (STAKES); Development Manager Ritva Larjomaa of the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities; Executive Director Mauri Upanne of the Central Union for Child Welfare in Finland; Secretary General Eeva Kuuskoski of the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare; Executive Director Marita Ruohonen of the Federation of Mother and Child Homes

and Shelters; Secretary General Hanna *Markkula-Kivisilta* of the Finnish Child Welfare Association; Secretary General Jukka *Tahvanainen* of the Finnish Youth Cooperation Alliance; Managing Director Helena *Hiila* of the Family Federation of Finland; Administrative Director Marianne *Österberg* of Folkhälsan; Elisabeth *Tigerstedt-Tähtelä* LL.M. of the Commission on Human Rights; Adviser Sami *Lahdensuo* of the Finnish UN Association; Organization Manager Inka *Hetemäki* of the Finnish Committee for UNICEF; Director Martti *Esko* of the National Ecclesiastical Board of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland; and Archbishop *Leo* of the National Ecclesiastical Board of the Orthodox Church of Finland. The Committee secretary was Project Manager Auli *Paavola* of the Central Union for Child Welfare in Finland.

The Executive Committee was chaired by Deputy Head of Department Riitta Viitala of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, with Senior Officer Ritva Vuorento of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health as deputy chair. The members of the Executive Committee were Ministerial Adviser Kari Ilmonen of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health; Medical Counsellor Merja Saarinen of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health; Development Manager Anna-Leena Välimäki of STAKES; Senior Inspector Pekka Elo of the National Board of Education; Managing Director Mirjam Kalland of the Swedish-speaking social welfare centre of expertise; and Information Manager Annamaija Puonti of the Central Union for Child Welfare in Finland. The Executive Committee secretary was Project Manager Auli Paavola of the Central Union for Child Welfare in Finland.

The Executive Committee drafted a proposal for the post of an Ombudsman for Children and for coordination of child and family matters (STM. Työryhmämuistioita 2004:7). The Government bill for an Act on the Ombudsman for Children was prepared at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health largely following the Executive Committee's proposal. Parliament passed the bill in December 2004, and the Ombudsman for Children will be taking up the post on 1 September 2005. In connection with the tenth anniversary of the UN Year of the Family, the Executive Committee participated in the PERHE (FAMILY) seminar of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health on 27 November 2004 to discuss family welfare and the development of family services.

### **3. UN Convention on the Rights of the Child —**

#### ***Foundation***

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is a legal instrument on human rights which is binding upon Finland and was enacted in 1990. Compliance with the Convention is monitored by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (Article 43). For the purposes of the Convention, a child means every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier (Article 1).

The Convention focuses on the child as a human being, his or her potential for development and need for support and protection. The child is considered an independent and sovereign individual with the right to his or her own opinions. These opinions must be taken into account with regard to the age and maturity of the child. The Convention heralded a shift from fulfilling the needs of the child to guaranteeing and implementing the rights of the child. The child is the subject of these rights, and the Convention thus has a basis in law.

National governments are primarily responsible for ensuring that the human rights of the child are adhered to with no discrimination within their jurisdictions (Article 2).

The child has civil and political rights (e.g. the right of participation, association and freedom of religion); economic, social and cultural rights (ESC rights, including the right to play, education and health care); and protection rights. The Convention also covers the special rights of children who are refugees, members of a national minority or disabled.

The Convention requires that states undertake all appropriate legislative, administrative, and other measures for the implementation of the rights recognized in the Convention (Article 4). The government must safeguard all rights of the child and protect and promote them — with regard to economic, social and cultural rights, to the maximum extent of their available resources and in keeping with the best interests of the child. Implementation of civil and political rights cannot be contingent on availability of resources.

Implementation of rights requires child policy planning, coordination, assessment of results and internal monitoring. Statistics and research are needed. Awareness of the rights and obligations of the Conventions lays the foundation for active measures (Article 45). The content and timetable of the reform depends on political will. NGOs play an important role in this process.

## ***The four principles***

The Convention contains four important principles that must be adhered to in the application of all rights under the Convention: the ban on discrimination (Article 2), the primacy of the best interests of the child (Article 3), the right to life, survival and development (Article 6) and the requirement to take the child's views into account with regard to his or her age and maturity (Article 12). These four principles are binding on national governments and create corresponding rights for the child.

### ***Ban on discrimination (Article 2)***

Every child has the right to be free of discrimination of any kind, irrespective of the child's or his or her parent's or legal guardian's race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status.

National governments must take all appropriate measures to ensure that the child is protected against all forms of discrimination in all areas covered by the Convention. Such discrimination may be aimed at an individual child or a group of children. Anti-discrimination legislation is not always enough to stop discrimination; in such cases, the government must take corrective action.

### ***Best interests of the child (Article 3.1)***

Under the Convention, in all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child must be a primary consideration.

The concept 'actions concerning children' has been understood to mean actions concerning 1) an individual child, 2) a specific group of children or 3) the child population of an entire country. Effective application of the Convention requires that the parties named in Article 3 must in all actions concerning children consider the impact of any given decision on an individual child, a group of children or the entire child population. The impact of such a decision on other social interests should also be considered. If other interests weigh more in the decision, the justification for the decision should explain why.

### ***Right to life, survival and development (Article 6)***

These rights are closely related to the other rights and principles defined in the Convention. The aim was to create optimum conditions for child survival (such as health and security) and balanced development (ESC rights and civil and political rights).

Developing a child-friendly society and the right of a child to be protected against violence and abuse are also important goals.

### ***Taking the child's views into account (Article 12)***

The child shall have the right to freedom of expression (Article 13) of opinions and views. The opinions of the child must be taken to account considering his or her age and maturity. The child shall in particular be provided the opportunity to be heard in any judicial and administrative proceedings affecting the child, either directly, or through a representative or an appropriate body, in a manner consistent with the procedural rules of national law (Article 12). Methods and education pursuant to such hearing should be developed.

Children and adolescents have the right to participate in and influence any matters that concern them, and any matters of public interest that interest them.

### ***The role of the parents***

Broadly, the child, the family and the state have a tripartite relationship in which the child has rights, the parents/guardians have responsibility and the state or local authority has obligations.

Parents have the primary responsibility for the upbringing and development of the child. The best interests of the child will be their basic concern (Articles 18.1, 3.1). The government must render appropriate assistance to parents and legal guardians in the performance of their child-rearing responsibilities and ensure the development of institutions, facilities and services for the care of children (Article 18.2). Parents have the right and the responsibility to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of the rights recognized in the Convention (Articles 3.2, 5, 12 and 14).



## 4. *A Finland Fit for Children* — *the National Plan of Action*

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### 4.1 *Vision of the Plan*

The vision and goal-setting of *A Finland Fit for Children* is based on two main premises: firstly, the shortcomings noted by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, based on Finland's second regular report on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (2000); and secondly, the results of the survey made among members of the National Committee on the Rights of the Child in autumn 2003 and the discussion of these results in the Committee. Finland's third regular report (July 2003) on the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child was also important background material.

#### *Shortcomings noted by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child*

The conclusions returned by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child concerning Finland's second regular report (October 2000) concerned certain shortcomings in implementation of rights and recommendations. The following is a summary of the Committee's observations and recommendations:

1. There is no body addressing child matters within the Government.
2. There are no mechanisms to coordinate broad-based programmes concerning children and to monitor implementation of the Convention, in either central or local government.
3. Municipalities have differing social policies and different levels of social services, particularly for the most vulnerable groups — poor families, single-parent families, disabled children, refugee children and children who are members of minorities.
4. The varying level of welfare services provided by municipalities is dependent on their financial resources, the priorities chosen by decision-makers and the various systems for granting funding.
5. Regular and comprehensive collection and analysis of information on child matters require improvement so that implementation of the Convention on the local level can be better assessed.
6. No final decision on founding a post of national Ombudsman for Children has been taken.

The National Committee addressed points 1, 2 and 6 in its proposal of spring 2004 for appointing an Ombudsman for Children and for coordinating child and family matters.

### ***Views of the National Committee on major shortcomings in children's welfare***

In autumn 2003, a survey was conducted among members of the National Committee as to which points they considered were important and should be included in the Plan of Action. These issues were the most important:

1. the child's best interests are not served in everyday life and in decision-making in society;
2. there are insufficient resources for parenting;
3. society lacks in effective structures, as witness the inflexibility of reconciling work and family, and lack of cooperation between early childhood education and care and the school system, on the one hand, and parents, on the other;
4. there are insufficient services for special groups; and
5. there is little potential for participation by children and adolescents.

### ***Vision: In a Finland fit for children, the best interests of children will be served in the everyday life of every child***

The National Committee summarized its view of the target situation thus: in a Finland fit for children, the best interests of children will be served in the everyday life of every child. To attain this vision, the National Committee set goals grouped according to the 'three Ps' of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The goals do not cover the full scope of the Convention, but it is hoped that this grouping will be helpful for monitoring the goals.

1. The child receives love and care at home (Protection).
2. The child has safe and long-lasting relationships and an environment that reinforces a sense of security (Protection).
3. The child has the basic and special services he or she needs and guaranteed subsistence (Provision — the child's right to care, including food and health care, which calls for adequate resources and services to be provided by society).
4. The child enjoys increased participation in everyday situations (Participation — the child's right to participate and to have his or her views respected).
5. The rights of the child are widely known.

The vision and goals are shown in table form on the following page.

*Vision: In a Finland fit for children, the best interests of children will be served in the everyday life of every child*

VIEWPOINT	GOAL MEASURES AND ACTORS	
<p><b>Protection</b> Parenthood and support from society</p>	<p><b>1. The child receives love and care at home</b> This goal includes the responsibility of parents/guardians, harmonization of skills and use of time, and development of peer support for parents. Underlying problems include: loneliness of children and inadequate care at home, parents and children feel they have too little shared time, parents' mental health and intoxicant abuse problems, insecurity caused by atypical employment relationships, the stress of caring for disabled children.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Support for parents from services aimed at families with children (family centres, early childhood education and care, schools, child welfare), parent partnerships. Municipalities, NGOs, parishes.</li> <li>- Promoting reconciliation of family and work. Labour market organizations, workplace-specific solutions.</li> <li>- Cutting down on atypical employment relationships.</li> <li>- Central and local government.</li> <li>- Improving the financial position of families with children.</li> <li>- Central government.</li> <li>- Introducing early-intervention methods. Central and local government, NGOs, parishes.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Protection</b> Society in upbringing Child-oriented approach in communities and environments where children grow up</p>	<p><b>2. The child has safe and long-lasting relationships and an environment that reinforces a sense of security</b> This goal stems from the child having a large number of adults responsible for his or her care and upbringing. Many of these relationships with adults are short-lived. This is not advantageous for the child's emotional development. Many measures by various parties are required to improve the incidence of long-lasting relationships and the security of the child's emotional life.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Long-standing child-adult relationships in daycare centres, schools and child welfare units.</li> <li>- Emotional bonding with children in upbringing, education work and fixed-term child welfare employment relationships.</li> <li>- Local government, NGOs, parishes.</li> <li>- A safe and functional environment to live and move around in. Central and local government.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Resources</b> Safeguarding the best interests of the child in the social assistance and service system</p>	<p><b>3. The child has the basic and special services he or she needs and guaranteed income</b> This goal involves regional equality in the provision of services and equitable access to services by children who are members of various minority groups. Underlying problems include: great regional variation in the availability and accessibility of health, social welfare, school and leisure services for children and families with children. The unequal accessibility of special services essential for psychosocial welfare in particular is a great problem. The income of families with children has declined in comparison with other population groups.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sufficient services for children who are members of minority groups. Central and local government, NGOs, parishes.</li> <li>- Municipal cooperation in service provision (regional approach).</li> <li>- Cooperation between administrative sectors in local government, NGOs and parishes in service provision (partnership approach).</li> <li>- Child policy programmes in local government.</li> <li>- Income transfers, financial support systems. Central and local government.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Participation</b> Children involved in decision-making</p>	<p><b>4. The child enjoys increased participation in everyday situations</b> This goal involves hearing the child and improving potential for participation and influence in the community where the child is growing up.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Developing and widely introducing methods for child participation. Early childhood education and care, schools, social welfare centres of expertise, NGOs.</li> </ul>
<p><b>The Convention on the Rights of the Child is widely known</b></p>	<p><b>5. The rights of the child are widely known.</b> This goal is based on the observation from the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child that the Convention is not well known.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Making the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child better known. Central and local government, NGOs, parishes.</li> </ul>

## 4.2 Goals of the Plan of Action

Each goal is here presented separately, with reference to the relevant articles of the Convention and sections of the final document *A World Fit for Children*. The statements of the Children's Parliament and Open Youth Forum in the city of Tampere regarding the goals of the National Committee are also recorded. Summaries of research and statistics related to each goal are given at the end of each section. These can be used for subsequent assessment and monitoring. The National Committee's recommendations for action are given at the end of the report.

### **GOAL 1.**

#### ***The child receives love and care at home***

*This goal includes increasing appreciation for parenthood/guardianhood, development of responsible parenting skills, planning of family time and improving peer support for parents.*

*Articles 5, 9, 18, 19 of the Convention*

*Sections 15, 17, 24, 32.2, 32.5 of the international Plan of Action*

#### ***Parenthood and support from society***

Close interaction with an adult is the foundation of the child's growth and development. In interaction, the child receives love, care and guidance from his or her parents. This relationship should be secure enough to survive any changes in family life. Families should have resources and the wherewithal to survive any problems that may affect the family or its members. Thus, parents need support in their upbringing role and in conflicts in their mutual relationship, and such help should be available at an early stage.

The wellbeing of the child is largely dependent on the wellbeing and ability to cope of the adults caring for him or her. If parents face problems in their lives, such as unemployment, intoxicant abuse or mental health problems, they may not have the energy to look after their children. On the other hand, education professionals also consider that parenthood is not sufficiently appreciated in our social decision-making. Not even parents themselves understand in all cases how important they are to their children and what a huge responsibility parenthood entails. The importance of grandparents in the child's life is also increasing. Grandparents who have retired but remain in good health are an invaluable help to many families with children when problems arise in everyday life.

Prenatal and child care clinics look after the health and wellbeing of mothers and children. However, the number of visits to such clinics declined in the 1990s due to cuts in regular checkups and home visits. Parents are pleased with the services provided by these clinics, generally speaking, but they would like to have more individual support addressing the family's needs and discussions about living in a relationship and about bringing up children. The interest of parents in information and in discussing child care is evident in the number of people who actively contribute to peer-group chat groups on the Internet. At the moment, clinics are being empowered and encouraged to adopt a more family-oriented approach in order to support the roles of both mothers and fathers. A guide on improving prenatal and child care clinics published in Finland recently (*Lastenneuvola lapsiperheiden tukena*, 2004) suggests that peer group activities should be expanded and made a part of the normal business of the clinic and also recommends home visits during pregnancy.

Nearly half of all children under school age are cared for at home, thanks to parental leave and child home care allowance. Parents who care for their children at home need interaction with other people in the same situation and temporary and part-time early childhood education and care services. Such support is particularly important for the parents of children who have chronic illnesses or are disabled and for immigrant families. There is a huge demand for local parent groups and cafés, part-time early childhood education and care services and 'low-threshold' support networks staffed by professionals and NGOs. Our system of prenatal and child care clinics and of daycare centres are not really oriented towards developing parent groups or supporting parenthood or couples, but changes are taking place in this respect.

Families should have better access to the network of prenatal clinics, child care clinics, early childhood education and care, and the school system. They should also have supported access to parents' peer groups. Particular attention should be given to couple relationships and to strengthening the parenthood of fathers. In peer groups, parents can help one another in questions related to the upbringing of children and in everyday problems. Friendships forged in such groups can prove to be important in the future, too. Peer groups are very important, particularly for parents on parental leave, other parents caring for their children at home and families who have just moved to a new community. A system like this could help prevent problems among couples and in child welfare and provide a better opportunity for early intervention in helping families with children. The potential for helping families from different cultures and families with disabled children will improve when professionals with special skills, such as family counselling clinic staff, are integrated into this support network.

### ***Problems in families***

The most common reasons for exhaustion and neglect of children in families are parents' mental health problems and intoxicant abuse, and relationship crises between the parents. In such situations, children and families often need help from society, which should be available at an early stage through the system of basic services.

Intoxicant use among pregnant women has become more common. It has been estimated that about 600 babies are born each year with a disability obviously caused by the mother's use of alcohol. About 100 babies are born each year with withdrawal symptoms due to the mother's drug use during pregnancy. There is a shortage of competence at prenatal clinics concerning intervention in the intoxicant abuse problems of pregnant women and ways of helping them. Sufficiently long treatment periods have proved to produce the best results. Mothers' peer groups have also yielded good experiences at the Federation of Mother and Child Homes and Shelters. It is important to ensure that mothers can always find treatment wherever they live.

Excessive use of alcohol increases violence in families. The use of corporal punishment is still widely condoned, even though it was prohibited by law in 1984. A study conducted by the Central Union for Child Welfare in Finland in autumn 2004 showed that one in three Finns considers it acceptable to administer corporal punishment to a child. Also, just under one in five Finns aged 15 to 45 without children are certain or fairly certain that they would use corporal punishment were they to have children of their own. Violence between parents also adds to the child's insecurity. Prenatal and child care clinics are introducing a questionnaire form designed to screen for domestic violence aimed at women. This will hopefully make it easier to talk about such problems and to get help for the family.

Problems between the parents and divorce affect many children. Divorce changes the structure of the family and often the child's home and everyday social relations, too. Securing the wellbeing of the child should always be the primary consideration in negotiating and deciding on custody and visiting arrangements in accordance with the upbringing goals of the Child Custody and Right of Access Act (section 1). In practice, contact arrangements and alimony are the primary concerns in any settlement, and the child's welfare is overlooked. Divorcing families also need counselling and therapy services. New forms of support, such as child-oriented family counselling and professionally guided peer groups for adults and children have yielded positive experiences, but the level of service provision is woefully inadequate. Prolonged disputes over custody and access are particularly painful for children.

Immigration often causes considerable changes in relationships within the family and erodes the family's life management skills. In particular, the parents'

lack of language skills and suitable training and work experience contributes to their being excluded from the labour market. In such a situation, there is a great risk of generational roles being reversed. Children and adolescents become subject to the influences of the new society more rapidly than their parents and begin to manage their new environment in terms of language and knowledge. This undermines the authority of the parents and their ability to guide their children in the new circumstances. The children may thus slip uncontrollably beyond the influence of the home. Such threats to family unity should be identified when integration plans are drawn up but also at daycare centres and schools. Immigrant parents must be guaranteed the opportunity for continuous and appropriately progressive language education and contacts with Finnish society.

### *Time and family or work and money?*

Development of a close relationship between child and parent requires a sufficient amount of shared time. However, families with children are increasingly forced to live on the ever harsher terms of working life. Many parents have full-time jobs and long working weeks. Their total weekly working hours are substantially higher than those of couples without children. The work culture has changed, and the distinction between work and leisure time has eroded. A lot of overtime is being done, and work also gets done at home. This brings work stresses home, which in turn places a burden on relationships within the family. Many young women have only fixed-term jobs, which translates into insecurity of income and insecurity in starting a family.

There are many dimensions to the reconciliation of work and family. One of the most problematic is the conflict inherent to the publicly declared goals concerning the family's future plans. Ensuring the country's economic competitiveness and social prosperity requires young people to study fast and to a high level, and to commit themselves to working life and adapt to the requirements of the job. Also, the financial situation in the family and the high cost of housing mean both parents have to work. On the other hand, public debate also focuses on the need to start a family early, to have children and to show commitment to the family. This places young adults in a dilemma. How should one be a good citizen: by studying and working hard or by having children? Doing both is extremely difficult and is only managed by a minority. How can society respond to the challenges it has itself declared?

A more positive attitude and tangible action are needed in labour market organizations, at workplaces and in homes if work and family are to be reconciled. A family with children has different needs at different points in its life cycle, so flexible alternatives for working hours are needed. However, it should

be ensured that family income does not suffer unreasonably through any new working hours solutions.

Employers and working life must take more social responsibility. Workplaces must encourage employees, and fathers in particular, to use their statutory family leave. Reconciliation of work and family is part of staff wellbeing, and it should be considered a component in the corporate and product image. In the long term, social responsibility will inevitably benefit the company's productivity. Reasonable employment conditions and employment security give people the confidence needed to start a family and function as a buffer against the threat of labour shortages caused by smaller families and an ageing population.

Judging by a leisure survey conducted by Statistics Finland, appreciation of home and family and of time spent with the family showed a clear increase throughout the population during the 1990s. At the same time, the perceived importance of work declined. Young adults, in particular, appreciate time spent with the family. This attitude shift is an important background factor to efforts to develop both working and family life so as to take the child's best interests better into account.

#### *Views of the Tampere Children's Parliament and Open Youth Forum concerning the use of time in families*

- Almost all the representatives at the Children's Parliament felt that the use of shared time in families is satisfactory at present. Less than half of the Open Youth Forum representatives felt that parents have too little time to share with their children. Although the children did not experience any major problems with the use of time in their own families, they thought about the topic and made suggestions.
- Reasons proposed for a lack of shared time included the parents' work commitments and family members' hobbies. Parents often also have hobbies nowadays, and they are frequently tired after the working day as well.
- It was proposed that if there were more shared time, families could take up shared hobbies, instead of everyone having a hobby of their own. Doing everyday things together was also highlighted: board games, cooking, helping younger siblings.
- The hope was expressed that there could be more flexibility in working life when the children are small. One parent should be at home when the child comes home from school.
- It was considered important to gain more financial support for caring for children at home. Alternatives to daycare were called for, such as clubs for children who are looked after at home. These children could make friends at such activities and play with them.



*Statistics and research findings*

- Being with one's family was considered 'very important' by 45% of respondents (aged 15 to 75) in 1991 and 71% in 2002. By comparison, the percentage considering work 'important' declined from 48% to 39% in the same period. Welfare review 2/2004, Statistics Finland.
- Nearly 40% of parents do not know where their school-age children (8th and 9th grades of comprehensive school, 1st and 2nd years of upper secondary school) spend their weekends. School health survey 2004.
- The percentage of children who get seriously drunk at least once a month is 23% in secondary school, 30% in upper secondary school. School health survey 2004.
- About 30,000 children per year are affected by divorce. Child care clinic expert working group memo 2003.
- The Church has 41 family counselling centres with 146 family counsellors and 113 consultants. These recorded 93,000 client visits in 2003, with families with children accounting for 80%.
- In over half of all families with children, both parents have a job. 50% of mothers of children under the age of 3, and 70% of mothers of school-age children, have jobs. One in four of all children live in families where both parents work long hours. Family policy strategy 2003.
- One child in three has a mother who works atypical working hours (shift work, evening work, night work and weekend work), and over half of all children have a father working similar hours. One in four mothers of under-aged children and one in ten fathers had atypical employment relationships (part-time or fixed-term job). Family policy strategy 2003.
- Nearly half of all working parents of children aged 5 to 11 felt that work interfered with family life to some extent. One in three felt that they did not have enough time to share with their children. Family barometer 2001.
- One third of all Finns condone corporal punishment of children. Just under one in five Finns aged 15 to 45 who have no children responded that they would certainly or fairly certainly use corporal punishment were they to have children. Over 90% of all Finns know that corporal punishment, pulling the hair, pinching, slaps and beatings are criminal acts. Survey commissioned from Gallup Finland by the Central Union for Child Welfare in Finland.
- 17% of children under the age of 18 have seen or experienced domestic violence. 30% of children who have witnessed domestic violence are themselves targets of the violence. Child care clinic expert working group memo 2003.
- The principal responsibility of parents in raising a child is to give the child a sense of security; 30% of professional educators but only 9% of parents agree with this statement. Family barometer 2000.

## **GOAL 2.**

### ***The child has safe and long-lasting relationships and an environment that reinforces a sense of security***

*Children spend much of their time outside the home, being cared for and educated by a number of education professionals. Relationships with these adults are thus important for the child. The security of these relationships in early childhood education and care, and the development of an environment that takes the child's security into account, constitute the substance of this goal.*

*Articles 5, 9, 18, 19, 28, 29, 31 of the Convention  
Sections 14, 15, 17, 32.8, 32.10 of the international Plan of Action*

### ***Security from adults***

Secure long-term relationships are a cornerstone of the child's proper development not only at home but also in early childhood education and care services, at school and in other care and education communities. The child needs to feel that a known adult actually cares about him or her and is responsible. The importance of this security is often overridden by other goals when adults plan their day-to-day timetabling.

At the moment, there seem to be both too many and too few adults in any given child's life. Daycare centres and schools have groups that are too large, with a low ratio of adults to children. In such groups, the individual child does not receive enough adult attention. By contrast, the child may have many different short-term group situations in the course of a single day and thus meets too many adults, as it were. It also does not help that the adults caring for and teaching the child may change, sometimes without warning. Even a short-term adult relationship may be meaningful to the child or group of children, and the end of such a relationship must be managed in a way that respects the children's feelings.

Favourable conditions should also be created for evolution of children's own social networks and friendships: sufficient time, adequate facilities, communal activities and permanent activity groups. Strong social networks prevent social exclusion and lay the foundation for participation skills. Large groups, by contrast, are often a breeding ground for discontent and bullying.

The National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland is a new national tool for guiding early childhood education and care. Its basic values include secure relationships for the child. Close cooperation between parents and education professionals is needed in early child-

hood education and care to ensure that the upbringing undertaken by the family, on the one hand, and educators, on the other, constitute a logical entity from the child's point of view. The values behind the new National Curriculum Guidelines for Comprehensive Education (introduced 1 August 2004 to 1 August 2006) include respect for community, responsibility and the rights and freedoms of the individual. This supports development of the pupil's identity while requiring cooperation between the school and the child's parents/guardians. The purpose of this joint responsibility is to further the learning potential of children and adolescents and to promote security and wellbeing at school. Cooperation between home and school must be defined in the school curriculum, jointly with health and social welfare services. The National Curriculum Guidelines also include a plan for developing pupil welfare services.

Municipalities are drawing up their own plans on the basis of the above-mentioned Guidelines. It is important for the notions of secure relationships, upbringing partnership and joint responsibility to be translated into local plans and above all into practical work with children. Application of professional expertise to identifying problems in families and to encountering and cooperating more widely with families should be increased.

An amendment to the Basic Education Act concerning morning and afternoon activities for schoolchildren came into force at the beginning of August 2004 and applies mainly to pupils in 1st and 2nd grades. Local authorities are responsible for organizing these activities, and they vary from one municipality to another. Statutory afternoon activities are currently provided by 359 municipalities. Morning and afternoon activities are a significant new service for families with children. They work specifically in the interests of the child, since they help prevent loneliness and integrate experiences of security into everyday life, also making it easier for parents to work. School clubs meant for pupils in grades 3 to 9 fall within the scope of these services. However, not nearly all schools have clubs, and there is a clear need to expand this activity.

Secure relationships with adults are particularly important for children in child welfare facilities. Being moved from one facility to another and encountering frequent staff changes interrupt these relationships. This problem has been addressed in drawing up national quality criteria for foster care. These have been considered from the child's point of view, and demonstrate what should be taken into account in the functioning of a foster care facility when its quality is assessed. The criteria enable units to improve themselves, and they also help local authorities to place the child in an appropriate facility immediately.

Disabled and ill children and adolescents must have the right to a secure learning environment, a pupil attendant and a personal assistant, depending on his or her needs. The attendant system is important for the life management

skills and independence of these children and adolescents, and in the best case the child can develop a meaningful secure relationship with the attendant. At the moment, there are not enough attendants available to help disabled children and adolescents at school. Attendants are often rotated at half-year intervals, and the afternoon assistant may be a different person from the pupil attendant at school. Families also have difficulties in organizing afternoon care for disabled schoolchildren.

For a Roma child, a secure environment means circumstances in which his or her identity can develop in a balanced and positive manner. However, a Roma child may experience cultural conflict between home and school. Cooperation between the home and the rest of his or her environment is important for a sense of security. Social exclusion of the child must be proactively prevented. Local support networks must identify the problems of Roma parents and offer parenting support.

In immigrant families, the immediate challenges of integration, such as learning the language and new job skills, may take up the parents' time and energy to such an extent that the child's needs are neglected. Parents without sufficient language skills, social networks and knowledge of society are at a disadvantage in bringing their children up in an alien environment. The staff of the daycare centre or school may well be the only adult contacts that immigrant parents and/or children have with the rest of the population at large. Such staff should recognize the importance of their roles in tutoring immigrants in the practices, services and social networks of Finnish society.

### *The physical environment*

A child-friendly environment supports the child's development into an independent and active individual who takes responsibility for the environment. The home, surrounding yards, daycare centre, school and other local environment are key elements in the development of a child's relationship to that environment. An environment that is close to nature and human in scale while also providing potential for activities is the best. A good living environment reinforces the child's safety and sense of security. Security threats in the environment from the child's point of view include traffic, which restricts movement and is an accident risk, sexist and violent outdoor advertising, and intoxicant abuse and violence in everyday life.

Finnish children enjoy a relatively good physical environment compared with many other countries. The most important manifestation of this is how freely children can move about. Children can usually travel quite safely alone to and from school and their hobbies. The proximity of countryside offers potential for interacting with the natural environment.

The child-friendly approach must be further pursued by constructing more non-vehicular traffic paths that help children move about independently, more local playgrounds and more areas safe from traffic within housing areas. Non-vehicular traffic paths are particularly important in rural areas where there is little public transport and distances are long. School yards are important for day-to-day exercise. According to a survey conducted by the Young Finland Association school yards in many cases offer poor potential for exercise and are in need of repair. Town planning should allow for the safety of routes used daily by children and for their effective placement in the urban structure. It is not desirable for children to have to travel to school through areas with heavy industry (traffic, pollution) or commercial facilities that engender antisocial behaviour (alcohol shops, porn shops, restaurants, etc.).

The security of the child's relationships can also be increased through housing construction and financial benefits. The necessity for families with children to move house could be reduced by providing opportunities for families to live in the same area regardless of changes in family structure. Housing areas must therefore have a wide variety of homes available and a sufficient range of services. A safe environment for living in and for moving about also makes people less willing to move away. Financial benefits to promote trans-generation housing solutions should also be developed. Housing policy subsidies should be allocated to solutions aimed at ensuring that several generations of a family can live close together. A housing policy like this would strengthen family social networks and offer potential for care arrangements and for help to be available when problems arise in everyday life.

### *The media environment*

The debate on the effect of the media on children has two main threads: one emphasizes the media as an educational environment and its technological potential, while the other underlines the adverse effects of the media, deriving from the range of entertainment it provides.

Children live in the same space and time as adults. The advertising and entertaining featured in adult-oriented commercial media introduce influences into the child's life that may interfere with or disrupt its development. Media entertainment is accessible to the child yet beyond the control of the child's parents. Entertainment of this kind has increased in all branches of the media. The visual media have a particularly powerful impact; at worst, they constitute violent and sexist visual harassment. This worries many parents and educators, since the time children spend watching TV has clearly increased over the past ten years. Children's media culture is filling up with entertainment, and their use of communications equipment is mainly in search of entertainment too.

One cannot overlook the unhealthy influence of TV and computer games on the child's habits. Sedentary hobbies reduce recreation and exercise, and are a factor contributing to child obesity.

Children learn media skills as a part of their everyday lives. Media culture is a significant learning and acting environment for children. The ability to interpret media content and to use IT equipment is one facet of the media competence needed in the information society. Children learn these skills not just at school but also in their daily leisure time. It is good for the development of media skills if children can discuss media use and content with adults. Contrary to what is usually assumed, new research shows that the use of ITC equipment does not actually supplant other hobbies.

Children must be protected from media risks in various ways. Advertising and entertainment is international, so broader international cooperation in curbing the availability of entertainment harmful to children is essential. We must also methodically develop children's culture and strengthen the function of consumer education, media education and sexual education in schools. Also, to support their parenting parents should be given much more information than at present about the media and the threats and opportunities they offer. Child welfare organizations and early childhood education and care professionals can support parents, for instance in issues concerning children's use of the Internet and computers. In the education administration, the protection of children against violence and sex in entertainment and the improvement of children's media literacy skills are major topics of development. The Ministry of Education is currently implementing a plan of action entitled *Mediaväkivalta, lapset ja media* (Media violence, children and the media), running from 2005 to 2007.

Children as consumers was a topic of focus for the Consumer Ombudsman in 2003-2004. New instructions have been drawn up concerning marketing aimed at children. Current problems in this sense according to the Consumer Ombudsman are purchases made by mobile phone and marketing in public spaces. The Consumer Ombudsman continues to monitor and assess the effects of the new marketing instructions. The Finnish Consumer Agency has an extensive information package online, with important material for advertisers, parents, children and schools alike.

*Views of the Tampere Children's Parliament and Open Youth Forum concerning school atmosphere and cooperation between home and school*

- School atmosphere was generally considered good in schools with grades 1 to 6. The atmosphere was generally considered to decline in schools with grades 7 to 9 and to improve again, considerably, in upper secondary school. Bullying was reportedly a regular occurrence in grades 7 to 9. The situation would be helped by having small schools at which pupils could get to know each other better. Parents would then also know each other better. It was hoped that teachers would address bullying more actively, and bullying should be generally discussed more in schools.
- There are many lonely pupils who have no friends. Teachers and school counsellors should pay more attention to this.
- The pupil-teacher relationship was described as one of love-hate, which was not necessarily seen as a negative thing. On the other hand, many representatives noted that their relationship with teachers was relaxed and open, but this depended greatly on the subject taught. Teachers and pupils should be more interested in talking to one another beyond the classroom situation; relations would then be better too. On the other hand, it was clearly observed that if a pupil is particularly interested in a specific subject, he or she is better treated by the teacher of that subject.
- Relationships with class teachers were perceived as closer than those with subject teachers.
- Criticism was voiced of teachers who take discussions about issues personally.
- Substitutes were considered to be in a difficult position. They should be firmer and more competent in their teaching.
- The transition from primary to secondary school was considered a frightening experience by many.
- It was hoped that teachers would maintain stricter discipline.
- School counsellors are important, and it was hoped that they could spend more time with pupils.
- Peer group conciliation was considered a good thing. Problems can often be solved through pupils addressing them themselves.
- 'Mad creativity' courses were recommended for teachers to help them see new teaching opportunities and to make them more open to new ideas and opinions.
- 'School is boring' is an attitude linked to a particular phase in life; in actual fact, almost everyone likes school and is willing to attend.
- In cooperation between home and school, sending notes is the most common form of communication but the least effective. Notes can get lost, signatures can be forged, and parents can grow tired of the endless stream of notes. Phone calls were considered better. E-mail or online monitoring (e.g. digital folders) were also proposed. In some schools, parents do not need to countersign test papers; this was not considered good.
- It was hoped that information between home and school could pass directly between teachers and parents. Pupils should not always be used as go-betweens.
- Class teacher meetings with parents and parental consultations were considered important. These should be continued in upper secondary school.
- School studies are helped if the parents of the pupils know one another. Parents could participate in school festivities with children of all ages.
- Children tell their parents only what they choose to tell about school. It is important for parents to know how the child is doing and to hear positive things, too, instead of only being contacted when something is wrong.
- Upper secondary school students were called upon to take more responsibility for their studies.

### *Views of the Tampere Children's Parliament and Open Youth Forum on the media and advertising*

- TV commercials were considered to have a different effect on children of different ages. The Parliament representatives did not believe that advertising had any direct impact on their lives. However, catch phrases from commercials do pass into everyday speech. Advertising was also seen as a channel for promoting good and important things. Instead of advertising a product, a commercial could advertise nature conservation, for instance.
- Mobile phones were considered good for keeping in touch, and spending limits were considered a good way to keep phone bills in check. Mobile phones must not be allowed to disrupt class work.
- It was observed that age limits on films may provoke the interest of those under the age limit. On the other hand, age limits were considered important because young viewers are not necessarily equipped to distinguish fact from fiction. It was believed that films do contribute to increased crime and also distort notions of right and wrong.
- In today's world, it is impossible to protect children completely. On the other hand, it was observed that TV increases understanding of reality and of the world. Information about events all around the world is available right here at home, which may serve to point out that things are pretty good in Finland.
- Current toy advertising was criticized as too attractive to small children.
- The importance of media criticism is covered well at school, at least in upper grades.
- Cartoons aimed at children were considered not very good. There is too much violence and too many situations where a character can do anything at all without getting hurt. This distorts children's perceptions of reality, especially since children often watch these programmes alone.
- In some matters, pupils in grades 1 to 6 should be protected from the media, or at the very least matters should be discussed with and explained to children.

### *Statistics and research findings*

- There were 3.5 children per carer at daycare centres in 1992 but 4.3 in 1998. Karvonen et al. 2000.
- Only 19% of municipalities estimate that their family daycare groups are of an appropriate size. Bardy et al. 2002.
- 50,000 children attend morning and afternoon activities for pupils. Of these, 58% are in 1st grade, 34% in 2nd grade and 8% in special education. These figures are as of autumn 2004.
- 7% of 9th-graders have been bullied at school at least once a week. School health survey, STAKES 2004.
- Total sales of alcoholic beverages (restaurant sales and retail sales) converted to 100% alcohol had increased by 7.1% in the period January to May 2004 compared with the same period the previous year; sales of spirits increased by 18.3%. National Product Control Agency for Welfare and Health (STTV) 2004.
- The percentage of non-users among adolescents has risen to 34% in comprehensive school and 18% in upper secondary school. The percentage of 17-year-old upper secondary school students who regularly get seriously drunk is now higher than ever. School health survey, STAKES 2004.



**GOAL 3.*****The child has the basic and special services he or she needs and guaranteed income***

*This goal involves guaranteed income for children and families with children, and regional equality in the provision of services and equitable access to services by children who are members of various minority groups. Children and adolescents are entitled to an equitable share of society resources such as financial subsidies and education, health, social welfare and cultural services.*

*Articles 20, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 31 of the Convention  
Sections 14, 17, 18, 21, 25, 32.3 of the international Plan of Action*

***Aims of society***

Communality, tolerance, partnership, caring, participation: these are buzzwords expressing widely approved aims in social development. Their use indicates that there is too little of them in our everyday lives. What could these terms mean from the child's point of view? Communality might mean that the child has familiar people around even outside the home. Tolerance might mean that no child feels discriminated against. Partnership might mean doing things together - for instance cooperation between early childhood education and care, school and home. Caring would give the child a sense of security in that there are others besides his or her parents who care. Participation would give the child the opportunity to be heard and the sense that his or her opinions have value.

There seems to be a great determination to achieve a society based on this sort of approval. It would be safe for children and beneficial for their development. So how should we further these aims in the structures and services of society? How far are the goals from reality? There are no indicators to measure the situation; we only have experience-based messages about individuality, exclusion, selfishness, indifference and lack of participation being all too common. These breed insecurity and loneliness for parents and children alike, for both educators and those to be educated. We should find a way out of this.

Society looks after the welfare of children and families with children through income transfers and a wide range of services. The aim is for children and families to have sufficient potential for a good life as equitably as possible. Finland has been moderately successful in realizing this aim compared with many other countries. However, since the recession in the 1990s and wider unemployment, inequality in incomes and the availability of services has increased. It has not helped that problem prevention and improvements in basic services were not

priorities in the 1990s, apart from daycare services. There is a growing need for special services, and a focus on efforts to provide them. But the range of services is excessively divided up by administrative sector and hierarchically fragmented.

### ***Basic services***

Welfare services for children and families with children form an important component of the welfare state, and they also provide security in times of crisis. Basic services, child care clinics, daycare and other early childhood education and care services, and school constitute the foundation of children's welfare services. These services are intended for all children and staffed by competent employees. However, in practice there are unreasonable regional differences in the accessibility and quality of services. The effects of the recession, which caused cutbacks in municipalities, can still be felt.

The subjective right to daycare ensures that every child has access to early childhood education and care, and municipalities have a broad remit for organizing these services so that they are convenient for families. The aim of the National Curriculum Guidelines on Early Childhood Education and Care in Finland is to promote the equitable development of early childhood education and care throughout the country, to guide content development and to create potential for improving quality. Municipalities are currently drawing up early childhood education and care plans.

At the moment, the child's best interests and point of view are not always taken sufficiently into account in the provision of services in early childhood education and care. A temporary change in a family's need for services or a reorganization of services may disrupt the child's social friendship and peer networks. Internal flexibility in early childhood education and care services should be improved, and the range of services should match the various needs of children and families.

The pre-school education reform has progressed well according to the Government Report, as it now covers nearly the whole of the relevant age group. However, there is a problem in that the recommended group size in pre-school education is exceeded in one in three groups regardless of whether the teaching is provided at a school or a daycare centre. Also, learning environments are different at daycare centres and at schools because of the different ways in which they operate. It is important to monitor and assess the potential for and implementation of pre-school education.

Basic education is equitable with regard to provision of teaching. Everyone is equally entitled to teaching regardless of gender, the socio-economic status of their family or their domicile. No regional or other systemic differences have

been observed in the quality of teaching. Though there are regional differences in learning results, these can be explained by the regional distribution of a number of welfare factors, not by differences in the quality of teaching. Improving the equality of learning results would require the allocation of resources and learning environment development to under-performing regions and schools. As an indicator of the high quality of teaching, we may note that the educational attainment of Finnish adolescents comes top among the OECD countries in maths, natural sciences, literacy and problem-solving, according to the OECD PISA 2003 study.

It is in the interests of Roma children to receive care and school services on an equitable basis and supportive of a positive cultural identity. Roma children must have the opportunity to participate in early childhood education and care and to maintain their own language and culture. Efficient measures are also needed to prevent the social exclusion of Roma children, support their integration and make it easier for them to start school. Roma pupils should be supported to prevent dropouts, and pupil welfare services should help them find places for further studies. Roma children must also have the opportunity to pursue a variety of hobbies.

The equitable right to teaching does not cover all adolescents with an immigrant background. There are thousands of adolescents in Finland who entered the country in their teens and who had little or no schooling in their native country. By Finnish standards, their educational attainment does not match their age. In order for the equitable provision of teaching to be achieved and the serious risk of exclusion after the completion of comprehensive school to be avoided, these adolescents must be offered sufficient teaching and counselling based on their needs. Younger children with immigrant backgrounds who speak a language other than Finnish or Swedish at home also have special teaching needs. They need reinforcement in the development of both their mother tongue and of Finnish and Swedish. A child's mother tongue is important for his or her cultural identity and parental relationship. If parents find it difficult to guide and help their children through school, special homework groups in schools or housing areas are needed.

Managing the comprehensive wellbeing of children and developing pupil welfare services has gained in importance in schools recently. A well-functioning and comprehensive pupil welfare service can promote development and learning, preventing the emergence of psychosocial problems and consequently a demand for child welfare and psychiatric services. However, multi-discipline pupil welfare services are not sufficiently available in schools at the moment, and there are great regional differences. Even provision of the traditional basic school health care service, access to the school nurse, is not without its problems today.

### ***Special services***

Service provision differences between municipalities are even greater in special services and minority services. The special competence required for managing child welfare and children's psychosocial problems is not available in many small municipalities. Regional development projects have been mooted as solutions in recent years, but their long-term effects have yet to be seen. There are some indications that regional cooperation does not necessarily bring great financial benefits, but it does improve the quality of the services. Regional cooperation is thus worthwhile in order to improve the regional equality of services for children and families with children.

Local authorities should pay attention to the needs of children requiring special support in municipal early childhood education and care plans. Language skills development difficulties and social problems are the most common reasons for requiring special support. If the child has difficulty in managing everyday things, this may lead to a vicious circle of secondary problems and exclusion. Timely support measures help the child to cope at school. Development of special support measures has been hindered by difficulties in obtaining trained employees, weak municipal finances and underdeveloped regional cooperation.

Under the Child Welfare Act, municipalities must provide pupils with sufficient support and guidance and take any necessary measures to remove social and psychosocial obstacles to school attendance. The founding of posts for psychologists and school counsellors by municipalities is not mandatory. At the moment, there are insufficient psychologist and school counsellor services available at comprehensive schools and vocational institutions, and the situation is extremely difficult beyond southern Finland. Upper secondary school students have practically no such services available. School health care is also an important component of school pupil welfare services; this, too, varies in quality from one municipality to another. The purpose of the school health care quality recommendation (2004) is to safeguard the foundation of school health care and make access to services more equitable.

Over the past five years, extraordinary budget appropriations of almost EUR 50 million have been allocated to children's mental health care and prevention of their social exclusion. This money has mainly been spent on projects, employee training and the founding of a number of children's and adolescents' psychiatric wards. There are still not enough child psychiatry beds available, and they are unequally distributed. Correcting the situation mainly requires more cooperation between primary health care and specialized health care, and

additional competence in early identification of problems and early intervention. Service systems should offer families services to help with normal, low-grade psychosocial problems. For example, resources and procedures in child guidance and family counselling should be developed so as to make them easily accessible 'low-threshold' services.

The increase in the number of children taken into care and the increasingly serious problems that children manifest constitute a strong signal that the quality of children's life in general is deteriorating. Almost 5 per cent of all under-aged children are currently on the books of the child welfare authorities. The increase in the number of children in open care is partly due to enhanced preventive efforts and early intervention. The increase in the number of children taken into care is probably due to families and children facing increasingly serious problems in which children cannot be helped through open care.

The range of foster care services has become broader. Different types of care units have been developed which respond better to children's and adolescents' problems. However, this wide range of services has led to children being moved more frequently from one care unit to another. More and more children have to live in several successive foster care units, which is detrimental to their chance of forming secure social relationships. The wide range of services thus in some way constitutes an uncontrolled kaleidoscope which faces foster care guidance and monitoring with new challenges and development needs. Publication of new national foster care quality criteria will help the situation somewhat.

There are an estimated 100,000 chronically ill and disabled children in Finland. Both the legislation and the social welfare and service system provide inadequate support for these children and their families, and getting help rests too much on the competence and proactive approach of the families themselves. The social security application procedure is time-consuming and exhausting. Service guidance is gradually being expanded, but it is impossible to say whether any particular municipalities have taken chronically ill and disabled children and their families into account in their projects.

There are some 30,000 children and adolescents with immigrant backgrounds living in Finland, a rather small number by international standards. They and their families need a higher level of care and services than the majority of the population. It is therefore important to give them sufficient information on the Finnish service system and child legislation. Children mainly become integrated into society through daycare and schools; they should be provided with a variety of contacts with Finnish culture in daycare and at school. Learning Finnish is the main thing, but the child's native language should not be neglected. Despite the provisions of the new Comprehensive School Act, there is still too little preparatory teaching and Finnish teaching for immigrant children. Immigrant girls need particular support in attending school so as to

prevent them from dropping out or not seeking continuing education because of having to care for their younger siblings. Children who have entered the country without an adult guardian have had great difficulties in obtaining child welfare services in municipalities, and they still remain disconnected from child welfare after-care services, because this was not taken into account in the proposals for amending the Act on the Integration of Immigrants and Reception of Asylum Seekers.

Public-sector resources are threatened by decreasing tax revenues and the declining dependency ratio. Even under these circumstances, equitable and sufficient basic services and the necessary special services should be guaranteed to all children and families. With scant resources, measures must focus on prevention and early intervention, though without forgetting corrective child welfare measures. Also, new ways of providing services through partnerships and cooperation between the public sector, NGOs and companies should be explored with an open mind. New forms of cooperation between administrative sectors and municipalities should be developed to cut costs and increase service quality. Improving the participation of citizens, children and families with children in the service processes is also important. In all, recent development work leads us to believe that the best way to help children with the present budget is through long-term cooperation between the various actors involved. Broad-based cooperation in service provision is beneficial both for the child and for the service providers, and it is also feasible from the point of view of social policy governance.

### ***Work and income for families with children***

The sufficiency, quality and regional distribution of services for children and adolescents are largely dependent on the training and pay of education and care professionals, the availability of permanent employment relationships for them, and public housing policy. Municipalities suffer from a shortage of staff in the health, social welfare and education sectors. Their problem will increase in the near future as existing staff members retire, since these sectors are not particularly competitive on the labour market. Over the next ten years, a total of 140,000 people, or one third of the entire staff, will retire in the municipal sector. There will be much work needed ahead to find replacements for them.

The prospect of such labour shortages has been acknowledged in the public sector, and more and more posts are being made permanent. The attractiveness of the public sector could also be increased through a family-friendly policy on the part of employers. Public sector employers could offer flexible working hours and jobs for parents with children in areas where this would be possible.

Financial income is a basic factor in the welfare of children and their families. Families with children have lagged behind in recent incomes development fuelled by economic growth. The percentage of families with children below the poverty line has increased in the past decade. Poverty is often caused by the unemployment or weak labour market position, short-term jobs or low pay of the parents. Families with children below the poverty line are also in many cases reliant on social security, have multiple children or are single-parent families.

Income transfers to families with children are not index-linked, and accordingly the purchasing power of the child allowance and child home care allowance has declined. However, higher employment and tax cuts have improved the finances of families with children on average. The child allowance and part-time care allowance were raised at the beginning of 2004. The child home care allowance, private child care allowance and minimum parental daily allowance will all be raised in 2005.

### ***Programmes and projects promoting the child's best interests***

Municipal child policy programmes are a new way of pursuing methodical, child-oriented municipal policy. Three-year monitoring of these programmes shows that at the end of 2003 68% of Finnish children lived in municipalities with defined local goals for developing the wellbeing of children, adolescents and families. Child welfare issues have been gaining ground in political decision-making too, and it is becoming more common for municipalities to incorporate them into their financial and operational planning. If municipal child policy is to develop and become well rooted, there must be national support and cooperation for programme implementation and for monitoring the wellbeing of children and adolescents. The indicator database currently being collated by STAKES is the result of a long-term project that has resulted in indicators that will allow municipalities to monitor children's wellbeing. Also, indicators of the quality of life of adolescents have been developed nationally by the Advisory Council for Youth Affairs, the Youth Research Network and STAKES.

A child welfare programme related to the National Social Welfare Development Programme is being drawn up. Its purpose is to improve the qualitative and quantitative properties of child welfare as comprehensively as possible, and it also involves reform of the Child Welfare Act. The results of the project will be available for application in 2007. A National Health Programme focused on narrowing health differentials and improving the equitability of welfare is also under way. Child welfare and child health care reforms in the near future will naturally derive from the studies and findings of these programmes.

There are also several regional projects for developing working methods and service models to address the problems of children and families with children.

Most of this development is aimed at prevention and early intervention, which over time will hopefully lead to a reduction in the demand for special services. It is important that the results of these projects are collated in the near future to ensure that new competence will be transferred to training people working with children and into practical working life as effectively as possible.

In programmes and on the national level, much work has been done to improve child welfare and services. Attention has been given to child care clinics, school health care, early childhood education and care, basic education, pupil welfare services, child welfare, recreation, youth work and culture. Programmes often focus on cooperation with parents, cooperation between administrative sectors and partnerships with third-sector actors, and also on the participation of children and adolescents. It is now time to implement, monitor and assess these programmes. How well they will promote communality, partnership, caring and participation is largely a matter for local decision-making. National action is also needed on the reconciliation of family and work, to ensure the availability of care and education employees and to raise the income of families with children.



*Statistics and research findings*

- The nominal scaling objective for the number of nurses in child care clinics is 340 children per full-time nurse (assuming no substitute) and 400 children per nurse if a substitute is available. The child care clinic in support of families with children, 2004.
- Open daycare was provided by only 14% of municipalities in 2001. Children's daycare review, Ministry of Social Affairs and Health 2001.
- Part-time special teaching was given to 20.1% of pupils in pre-school, basic and supplementary general education, i.e. 124,137 pupils. Information supplied by the National Board of Education.
- 80% of comprehensive schools have a pupil welfare group. State Provincial Office basic services assessment in the sector of the Ministry of Education: Pre-school and basic education pupil welfare services and library book acquisitions, 2004.
- There are about 150 full-time school psychologists and about 250 school counsellors. Most of them are employed in the southern part of the country. Pupil welfare working group memo, 2002.
- The recommendation is that a pupil should have three extensive medical check-ups during comprehensive school. There should be no more than 600 pupils per full-time school nurse. School health care quality recommendations, 2004.
- The number of children and adolescents in psychiatric institutional care has increased from 5,215 to 8,400 over ten years. Social and health care statistics annual, 2001 and 2000.
- 7% of children under the age of 18 attend child guidance and family counselling clinics (4.6% in 1991). Kauppinen, Forss, Taskinen, 2003.
- In 2003, 56,379 children were involved in child welfare open care; this was an increase of 2,000 on the previous year. STAKES, statistics bulletin 17/2004.
- In 2003, 14,392 children and adolescents were placed in care outside the home, representing an increase of 200 children on the previous year. STAKES, statistics bulletin 17/2004.
- Of the children placed in care, 60% were in institutions or other care facilities and 40% in foster families. STAKES, statistics bulletin 17/2004.
- Boys are threatened by social exclusion; 12% of boys aged 15 to 19 are neither in education/training nor working. The percentage for girls is 3.7%. Education at a Glance, OECD 2003.
- Every year 150 to 200 adolescents drop out of comprehensive school. Kartovaara, Sauli, 2000.
- The number of children living below the poverty line doubled in the 1990s and now totals 120,000, or 11% of all under-aged children. Bardy, 2004.

## **GOAL 4.**

### ***The child enjoys increased participation in everyday situations***

*This goal involves hearing the child and improving potential for participation and influence in the community where the child is growing up.*

*Articles 12, 13 of the Convention  
Section 32.1 of the international Plan of Action*

### ***Adult attitudes crucial***

Every person's equal right to participate in and influence general social development and matters bearing on themselves is a fundamental value in a democratic society. The Finnish Constitution Act requires adults to create a system whereby children and adolescents can contribute to matters bearing on themselves in a manner befitting their maturity. The Local Government Act in turn requires municipal authorities to ensure that local residents and service users have opportunities to participate in and influence the workings of the municipality. Under the Constitution Act, these rights also apply to children. The Convention on the Rights of the Child gives children the right to express their views on all matters affecting children at a level corresponding to their maturity. The Finnish Child Welfare Act and Aliens Act also require children to be consulted in decision-making. Consequently, there is a solid legal basis for child participation.

Children's wellbeing does not merely mean that adults provide resources and care; they also need to listen to children and take their views and hopes into account in various everyday situations. The potential for child participation depends on how important those responsible for their upbringing consider this to be and how they interpret what it means. Thus, action to promote child participation must derive from adults and from everyday activities and forms of interaction. Those working with children and adolescents must therefore be given training in children's rights and ways of promoting their participation.

Children and adolescents are often better able to understand things and express an opinion on them than adults think. That is why they should be allowed to participate at different levels and in a variety of ways - from the home to international forums, and from speaking their mind to exercising real influence. In addition, there must be room for several different forms of participation: it can be occasional or permanent, spontaneous or organized. Children and adolescents must not, though, be left to learn the rules of participation and democracy on their own. Feedback from adults is an important element in

participation because it tells children how well they are doing and how important their views are. Adults should be available and ready to listen whenever children and adolescents need their help. Participation also presupposes having enough information, and the right facts must be provided for every participatory situation.

Research findings and children's own experiences show that children's views are not taken sufficiently into consideration. However, there are signs that our operating culture is in fact changing and taking children's views better into account, because several pilot schemes and development projects are under way. National development plans for both early childhood education and care and basic education aim to improve opportunities for child participation. NGOs are in turn providing a wide range of concrete ways for children and adolescents to gain experience of taking part and contributing. This work also plays an important role in teaching them about civil activities and participation.

Child participation has developed fastest in environmental planning, where several models and methods have evolved. In particular, channels for child consultation, participation and information are being developed for various web sites. It is also important to devise approaches for reliably ascertaining the opinions of children and employing them in legal disputes. Judges and social workers must be given more training in this field. At the same time, care must be taken to ensure the child's right not to express an opinion in dispute issues. Responsibility that should be carried by an adult must not be offloaded onto a child.

### ***Children's experiences of participation***

When the school day is over, children face problems with loneliness and lack an adult to talk to. Children have a great need to tell some adult about what has happened to them during the day. They also want to ask about problems they are encountering at various stages of their development. The children's and adolescents' telephone help-line of the Mannerheim League for Child Welfare has become well established as a service whose staff listens to and helps schoolchildren. Follow-up studies on the service show that children have too few opportunities to talk to adults.

A recent interview survey indicates that children aged 10 to 13 feel they have quite a lot of influence at home. For instance, they have a considerable say in everyday consumption issues. Most children think that their parents take their views into account when buying food and other commodities, and in deciding how to spend leisure time. Children also have considerable independence in deciding about their own things. Other research has yielded similar findings.

At school, however, children have been shown to have few opportunities to participate and exert influence. International comparisons show that Finnish pupils' perception of their power to express their opinions at school and contribute to decision-making is lower than that of pupils in some other countries. They also feel that their teachers are not very interested in them. And yet it has been proved that whether children are happy at school depends partly on how much they can contribute and share responsibility, and on their relationships with their teachers. Happiness at school has in fact been shown to be low in Finland compared with other countries.

### *New forms of child consultation and participation*

The Finnish early childhood education and care system has developed a widely used and internationally approved method called 'storycrafting'. Storycrafting is based on the idea that everyone has thoughts, knowledge and stories that nobody else has. Everyone's thoughts have value and should be listened to. In storycrafting, the children are the subjects; they say things and the adults write them down. The method demonstrates in a concrete way that children have important things to say to adults even as toddlers, but their way of telling things is different from that of older children or adults. In storycrafting, experiences of listening to children and passing on what they tell create a new culture of child consultation and participation.

The aim of peer conciliation, in turn, is to reduce disruptions in school operations by furthering pupils' life management skills. In the process, pupils settle their disputes among themselves with a teacher ready to help in the background. All kinds of views can be expressed, and the parties to a dispute are impartially guided towards a solution to their problem. The method has been developed jointly by the Finnish Red Cross and the Voice of Youth campaign of the daily newspaper Helsingin Sanomat. It requires some training for both teachers and pupils. Launched in 2000, it is currently used at around 100 schools. Intrinsically, it is a form of very early intervention in problems. Pupil response to the method has been positive.

STAKES has devised an approach called a 'family group conference' and developed it into a child welfare method that suits Finnish conditions. It has brought openness and transparency into the social work involved in child welfare and furthered opportunities for participation and consultation in matters concerning the child and family. The authorities concerned provide the family group network with their own information, after which the child, its parents and the wider family group work together on a plan for solving the problem in the best interests of the child. The family group chooses one person to help prepare the child to attend meetings and express his or her personal opinions. This per-

son also ensures that the family group concentrate on the child's concerns rather than arguing among themselves when they meet and continues to support the child even after the process is over. The method is used by some 50 municipalities, and about 100 family group conferences are arranged every year.

When municipalities draft their child policy programmes, they chart the opinions of children and adolescents through numerous questionnaires, which is in itself a good thing. However, the subsequent programme reports drafted do not usually explain how these opinions influenced the programme. In principle, child policy programmes should offer new channels for participation by children and adolescents, but as yet they seem not to have increased such participation in the workings of the municipalities concerned. The Ministry of Education supports the work of the Finnish Children's Parliament association. The aim is to extend activities like those of the Tampere Children's Parliament to other parts of the country.

The Young People's Participation project aims to prevent the social exclusion of adolescents and promote opportunities for participation and influence. The aim is to guarantee every young person a place in post-comprehensive education or some other way of building a life for themselves. Particular support is needed to help adolescents from an immigrant background to adjust to and become integrated into Finnish society.

### *Views of the Tampere Children's Parliament and the Open Youth Forum on participation*

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- There should be pupil committees at all schools and in all grades. Pupils should be involved more, and governing boards should include more than two representatives from each class, at least in small schools.
- The Children's Parliament and Open Youth Forum were considered good ways to participate and exert influence; Finland should have more of them.
- At home, children sometimes get the feeling that parents may listen, but don't pay attention.
- Children and adolescents can themselves help to reduce comments such as "The youth of today are dreadful", though adults are often guilty of generalizations.
- Schools should survey pupil opinion when seeking ideas about various matters.
- Pupil committees could have various working groups for different themes.
- Pupils should be able to join in general discussions with their principals and teachers about different subjects and timetables.
- Pupil committees should be more active.
- There is more participation if schools are not too big.
- The attitudes of teachers, decision-makers and other adults are important.
- School rules can be formulated jointly.
- It is important for individual pupils to be active, and there should be room for this during sessions with class teachers/supervisors. The more active pupils should also assume responsibility for getting the views of the quieter ones heard.
- Joint talks between the principal, teachers and pupil representatives were considered a good thing; topics could include ways of increasing general satisfaction within the school, and various projects and events.
- Meetings between the pupil committee and the principal are important, as is pupil representation at teachers' meetings when needed.

### *Statistics and research findings*

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- Around 200 various action groups of children and adolescents operate in Finnish municipalities. (Figure from an assessment of youth work made by the State Provincial Offices in 2004.)
- In 2004, 30% of comprehensive school 9th graders did not feel their voice was heard at school (35% in 1998) and 18% of senior secondary pupils (26% in 2000). (School health survey, 2004.)

## **GOAL 5.**

### ***The rights of the child are widely known.***

*The Convention on the Rights of Children also requires States Parties to promulgate its message. This goal calls for a systematic approach to the dissemination of information on the Convention.*

*Article 42 of the Convention  
A World Fit for Children, Declaration, section 8  
Sections 31d), B33, C52 of the international Plan of Action*

### ***Little information on children's rights has been disseminated, and in a haphazard manner***

The States Parties have engaged to make the principles and commitments of the Convention known among both adults and children in a practicable and active manner. The Committee on the Rights of the Child has also drawn up instructions for the application of Article 42 of the Convention. These require the entire population to be familiarized with the principles of the Convention. A broad-based national information strategy is needed for this purpose, to guarantee continuous and systematic dissemination of information. This must be made available to children in a form they can understand, and also in the most important minority languages. Information provision cannot be solely one-way; both adults and children within the nation must participate and interact. It should also be possible for children to contribute to spreading information about their own rights. The Committee especially emphasizes that the Convention should feature in school curricula and in the vocational training of those working with children.

The Committee has recommended that Finland should devise more creative approaches for getting the Convention better known and incorporate it into school curricula. The Convention should also be translated into Roma and other minority languages, and should be available in the languages of the main immigrant groups. The Committee also recommends that training should be arranged for professionals working with children and dealing with child-related matters.

UNICEF has issued an Implementation Handbook for the Convention on the Rights of the Child, "Making the Convention Widely Known", UNICEF 2002, which contains a checklist to help with assessment of national implementation of Article 42 (Finnish checklist: Annex 3).

Each State Party is primarily responsible for ensuring that the human rights of children are complied with and realized without any kind of discrimination within its jurisdiction (Article 2). According to the Committee, the state is also responsible for realizing the rights of the child when partial responsibility has been transferred to another actor, such as a local authority or the civil society. The state thus carries considerable responsibility for ensuring that information about the Convention is spread throughout society. So far, the Finnish government has responded to its obligation to provide information mainly by providing financial support for a number of projects sponsored by NGOs. As a result, information provision has been haphazard and lacks any overall plan. The government has also arranged training for Ministry of Justice judges on family law issues, including children's rights.

In autumn 2004, on the initiative of the Human Rights Commission of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Finnish NGOs produced a survey of information provision on the Convention in Finland. This showed that provision of information was still spasmodic but had increased since the 10th anniversary of the Convention in 1999. Organizations focusing on children have mainly produced material for the secondary (higher comprehensive) schools and upper secondary schools, for teachers and to some extent for parents. Next in volume comes teaching material for the primary (lower comprehensive) level and post-comprehensive level. No study has been made of the impact of information material used.

The above-mentioned survey found that Finland had not implemented the Committee's recommendations about information provision. The Convention is not available in minority languages or to immigrants, and there are shortcomings in the training of professionals. Finnish children and adolescents do not feel that they know enough about the Convention. A vote taken at a special children's assembly in 2002 judged Article 42 to be the most important provision in the Convention. This meeting also proposed that information provision through schools and the media should be increased.

The survey likewise showed that the Convention is not sufficiently reflected in the principles behind school curricula. Children's rights or the Convention on the Rights of the Child are mentioned in curricula only once, with reference to the teaching of ethics and philosophy of life to pupils in grades 1 to 5. Only a small percentage of schoolchildren in Finland opt to take this subject, so incorporation of the Convention into teaching is haphazard and depends on the individual school.

The NGO survey proposes that sufficient resources should be provided for the information function of the Office of the Ombudsman for Children. Other measures to increase information provision proposed in the survey include the following:



- The National Board of Education should ensure that the rights of the child are incorporated into curricula and encourage teachers and publishers to include the Convention in teaching material.
- Concrete information on the Convention should be included in the informative material in the 'baby box' given to expectant mothers.
- The Finnish Broadcasting Company should devote more resources to broadcasting information on the Convention.
- Financial aid from the government should go to large-scale information projects arranged jointly by NGOs.

The organizations sponsoring the survey hoped specifically for a shift from spasmodic, campaign-style information to a coordinated, long-term approach. Within its jurisdiction, the government is primarily responsible for ensuring that children's human rights are realized and complied with without discrimination.

The proposal made by the National Committee on the Rights of the Child concerning establishment of the post of Ombudsman for Children sought to correct the situation outlined above in that it makes promotion of the information obligation written into the UN Convention one of the Ombudsman's main functions. It would certainly be justified for the Ombudsman for Children to assume responsibility for the formulation of an information strategy regarding the Convention.

### ***Finland also responsible for the world's children***

Some 85% of the world's children live in developing countries. About half the population in the least developed countries are under 18, compared with 22% in prosperous OECD member states. Over half of these children in developing countries live in serious want, deprived of proper food, clean water, shelter and education. A poor child does not go to school, or does not do well at school if he or she does go. He or she is socially excluded and is later unemployed or unable to get proper work. Poverty during childhood is the main reason for adult poverty. Those marginalized as children are unable to help build their society as adults. This is why attempts to halt the poverty spiral must start with children.

The interests of children must be raised to prominence in development co-operation and other international collaboration. Article 2 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child requires States Parties to take all proper steps to realize the rights identified in the Convention. The areas concerned are defined primarily in Article 24 (primary health care, low mortality among mothers and infants, nutrition, good clean water, hygiene, traditional practices prejudicial to

children). The States Parties are called upon to undertake action on the fullest possible scale within their available resources and if necessary in international cooperation.

The instructions of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child state that development cooperation must be enlisted here. The Committee also urges countries donating aid to comply with the recommendations of the Convention when drawing up their development policy strategy, and also to give children priority as recipients of aid.

The Finnish government succeeded in raising its development appropriation to 0.7% of GDP in 1990. Because of the recession in the early 1990s this percentage plummeted, and despite the subsequent economic upswing it has not been raised since; it currently stands at 0.348%. Assuming the economic situation permits, Finland aims to achieve the 0.7% recommendation again in 2010.

The National Committee considers that Finland must strive seriously to achieve the 0.7% level and must not allow the economic situation to prevent it from reaching this goal. Finland should also strive to incorporate the UN Convention's recommendations into its future political strategies for development cooperation, giving the interests of children priority as recipients of assistance, and also monitoring and assessing the impact of development cooperation on children.

#### *Views of the Tampere Children's Parliament and Open Youth Forum concerning awareness of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*

- 28% of the Children's Parliament representatives and 17% of the Open Youth Forum representatives had never even heard of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Information on the Convention had been obtained from meetings of the Children's Parliament, in religion and ethics classes and morning prayers and the like at school. One representative mentioned UNICEF schools.
- School was considered a good channel for obtaining information, and children's rights should be discussed more there.
- The Convention was considered important because children are the future and children should have the right to a happy and secure life anywhere in the world. It was also observed that if children are advised of these rights while they are children, they will remember them when they are adults and in a position to make decisions. Emphasizing the special status of children was considered important.
- Children could be given direct information on the Convention in grades 1 to 6.

### *Statistics and research findings*

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In autumn 2004, Finnish UNICEF commissioned a survey of comprehensive school 6th graders on children's rights (responses received from 18 schools/367 pupils). This showed the following:

- Less than a third of the respondents recognized the UN Convention by name. Among well over 300 children, only 21 could say anything about the content of the Convention. Thus, the Convention document and especially its content are not very well known among 12 year-olds.
- However, nearly all the respondents had heard talk of children's rights and had some sort of idea what these rights mean. Most of the children thought that the rights refer solely to concrete essentials, such as meeting basic needs, education, health care and shelter.
- 72% of the children thought that fundamental rights also include the right to have their own opinions.
- The children were asked what things needed improving in order for children and adolescents in Finland to have a better and happier life. Many replied that their views were not listened to enough. They also felt that they did not have enough influence over things that concerned them.

Survey on information provision regarding the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 2004:

- In terms of volume, the main sources of information material were organizations focusing on children (133 references), followed by various authorities (36 reports), YLE (Finnish Broadcasting Company) (25 stories) and other organizations (2 references). The survey found 196 references altogether.

## 4.3 Child impact assessment

### *Assessment of decision-making promotes children's interests*

Article 3.1 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child stipulates that “In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.” What “interests of the child” means is not defined further in the Convention. The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child requires every State Party to analyse and define what the interests of the child are in different circumstances and in various sectors of society. In principle, this means performing a child impact assessment before any decision is made.

The purpose of the Article is that it should apply to all children and to all actions concerning children mentioned in the Convention. The Article uses ‘children’ in the plural when speaking of these actions. Elsewhere, the Convention always uses the singular form ‘child’, because it is speaking of the rights of the individual. Thus the interests of the child apply equally to 1) the child as an individual, 2) a specific group of children and 3) children in general (a country’s entire child population).

The interests of the child must be prioritized in the action and decision-making of courts of law, authorities and private parties. This means that the child’s viewpoint must be taken into account when decisions are being planned, laws drafted, and appropriations and other resources allocated, and when all these processes are being assessed. The criteria for the interests of the child must be defined in the legislation or in the preamble to individual laws. Authorities and courts of law should ponder the interests of the child on the basis of these criteria. Any positive or negative effects on the child arising from various decision options must then also be assessed.

Priority must specifically be given to the interests of the child in situations which mean a child will be separated from his or her parents (Article 9), the issue concerns the parents’ or guardians’ responsibility for the child’s upbringing and development (Article 18), or the child is being transferred into alternative care (Article 20), or which concern adoption (Article 21), deprivation of liberty and involvement in processes of the police or justice system (Articles 37 and 40). The interests of the child must also be taken into account in other actions, such as traffic planning (right to survival and development, Article 6) and culture and leisure time (Article 31), media products (Article 17), planning of central/local government finances (Article 4) or privatization of community services (Article 3). Thus, the family circle and family policy are not the only spheres in which the interests of the child must be taken into account.

The Committee on the Rights of the Child recommends countries that have ratified the Convention to make a child impact assessment in the case of all decisions affecting the child. However, the Committee has not issued any instructions on how this should be carried out. The Convention overall provides guidelines on what is good for the child. When decisions are made that will obviously have a major impact on the child or children, systematic efforts must be made to analyse and assess the impacts of the measures involved before any final decision is made. Extensive multidisciplinary expertise is usually needed to analyse impact, and a wide variety of methods need to be used. Responsibility for making the assessment rests with the decision-making authority.

The interests of the child should be the guiding principle for all long-range development work. It is therefore important for assessment approaches to be laid down, together with the necessary structures. Impact assessment is always a challenging task. It must not be the responsibility of a single official. Probable problems include the following: should attention focus on the individual child, a group of children or the interests of children generally? how can the varying interests of different children be reconciled? how can one see whether a decision will have an impact on children? how should the impact assessment be conducted? which consequences should be examined?

### *A model for analysing the child's point of view and child impact*

The model below is designed to present the main points of view that should be taken into account when the impact of various decisions on children and children's living conditions is assessed. It has been devised using an analysis structure proposed by Louise Sylwander, Sweden's former Ombudsman for Children, and suggestions from Sirpa Taskinen of STAKES for a breakdown of the process and impact. In content, the model should suit various types of issue at different social levels and study of the interests of a particular group of children or children in general. Its viability for this purpose has not been tested in practice, but it is based on other methods for human impact assessment developed and used by STAKES.

The analysis model comprises three sections: preconditions, the assessment process and impact. In analysing the impact of decisions on children, the following questions must be examined:

## A. Preconditions for analysis

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Analysis presupposes comprehensive information on legislation related to the decision or plan, the rights of the child and the development and living circumstances of the child.

- On which statutory documents and/or instructions is the matter based?
- Do these take account of articles in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, specifically:
  - the prohibition on discrimination, Article 2
  - the priority to be given to the rights of the child, Article 3
  - the right to life, survival and development, Article 6
  - consideration for the views of children, Article 12
- Are the decisions based on scientific and/or expert information?

## B. The assessment process

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The process includes

- charting and describing the situation,
- analysing the data,
- testing the recommendations, and
- monitoring and assessing the decisions.

In the working process, it is very important for the various parties involved in formulating the proposed decision to be identified and their commitment gained. In particular, this means listening to the views of children. Sufficient time must be allowed for preparation and monitoring. Agreement must be reached on the indicators to be used in the monitoring.

- How have children's views been taken into account in the preparation work and how were they obtained?
- Where and when are the decisions being made?
- Who are the responsible actors in various phases of the process?
- How will impact be monitored, and which indicators will be used?
- According to what schedule will the impact of the decision or plan be studied?

It is important for the actual impact of decisions to be assessed after the fact, and the results compared with the advance analysis. The aim is to see whether the impact is in fact what was assessed in advance, and to establish whether any follow-up action is needed. The views of the children affected by the decision must also be heard in the monitoring process.

## C. Impact assessment

### C1. Direct impact on children

Direct impact on children is the main component factor in the analysis. Here, the effects of the particular decision on children's health, living conditions and movement, participation and equality are all assessed. The detail of the assessment will vary, depending on the content of the plan or decision concerned. The following is a list of impact component factors from a general viewpoint. Assessment will examine the amount, trend and quality of change.

#### *Impact on health*

- risks of accident
- air impurities (dust, smell, gases)
- noise
- quality of household water
- composition of children's food and their eating habits
- exposure to radiation

#### *Impact on living conditions and movement*

- unimpeded movement in the surroundings of the home, and on the way to school and to recreations
- amenability and health of housing and the housing area
- effects of traffic arrangements on the functional structure of the housing area
- children's playtime and recreation areas
- sense of community in the housing area
- nearby places for physical recreation

#### *Impact on involvement and participation*

- opportunities for children to participate in decision-making
- risks of social exclusion of the child

#### *Impact on equality*

- regional equality of children
- social equality of children
- equality between girls and boys

## C2. Indirect child impact

Decisions made by society always have a wide variety of indirect effects that are often extremely difficult to assess because in any society "everything affects everything else". The indirect effects that are important and obvious in terms of children are factors related to the family and children's services.

### *Impact on the family's finances and on services*

- families' employment situation
- families' living costs
- public and private services, such as health services, housing and recreational services, education, transport and movement, commerce
- supply, quality and availability of services: especially children's clinics, daycare and school services

### *Impact on the community and the area*

- values, norms and behaviour
- quality of life and/or lifestyle
- security
- social relations and status of population groups
- relations between different interest groups
- local people's sense of solidarity and local identity
- stimulus and opportunities for recreation
- aesthetic quality of the area

## **Promoting child impact assessment**

In Finland, decisions made by society are not assessed from the child's viewpoint. Opinions from various quarters concerning law drafting and committee work do include some degree of child impact assessment, but generally speaking the period for formulating such opinions is so short that no comprehensive assessment is possible. The views of children are practically never heard as part of the process.

If we are to respond to the challenge laid down by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child concerning child impact assessment, the model outlined above must be applied experimentally to some concrete social decision, and on that basis developed for wider application. The experiment could, for instance, target the recent reform of the tax on alcohol.



The alcohol tax cut enacted in spring 2004 reduced the prices of alcoholic beverages, and consumption covered by statistics, especially in the case of spirits, has risen appreciably since then. The 'alcohol barometer' compiled in autumn 2004 found that the worst problem was the rise in child welfare costs caused by the consequences of more drinking. The 'A' clinics and municipal youth units have noted a shift towards spirits in the consumption habits of habitual users. There is a similar tendency among adolescents, though not so pronounced.

A Government Alcohol Policy Programme has been launched to reduce the harmful effects of drinking. It is based on a Resolution issued by the Government on October 9, 2003 regarding the main lines of alcohol policy, one key goal of which was to prevent the harmful effects of alcohol on the welfare of children and families. Considering this target, the alcohol tax cut can be viewed as a harmful social decision from the viewpoint of children. The whole field covered by the Government Programme should actively monitor developments and embark on the necessary measures if problems among children and families with children increase as a result of heavier drinking because of the tax cut.

In the Committee's view, the best body to develop the child impact assessment model and broaden its application to other areas of life important for children would be STAKES.

## **5. Recommendations for action and ideas for development**

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The Committee puts forward certain recommendations and ideas for progress towards attainment of the Plan of Action targets that it considers timely for the realization of children's interests and wellbeing. The order in which the recommendations are presented follows the structure of the Plan of Action, and the main justifications for them can be found in the text of the Plan. The recommendations have not been ranked in any order of importance.

The Finnish National Committee on the Rights of the Child proposes to the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health that it should promote implementation of the following recommendations in its own operations and the work of the Government, and in its cooperation with other parties:

### **1. Child upbringing partnership in basic services**

The operating culture in basic services for children and families should be one of partnership in child upbringing. This partnership derives from the child's needs, and its guiding principles must be to realize the child's interests and rights. Ensuring their children's upbringing and wellbeing is the principal task of both parents. Parents should also have ready access to help and services from society to suit their changing family situation and needs. Modern families with children need local support networks particularly badly.

- Basic services for families with children should provide parents with support in making their relationship work better and in developing responsible parenthood.
- Mothers and fathers expecting their first child should have the chance to attend preparatory classes in family skills at a maternity clinic and be encouraged to join parents' groups. Support can also be arranged within municipalities by child care clinics, daycare centres, schools or NGOs.
- Supportive early intervention in problem situations in families and forms of preventive child welfare such as work in families, home visits and home help should be integrated into a service network readily accessible to families.

- Municipalities should embark on a process of collaboration between professionals working with children, civil organizations, volunteers and parishes to form a support network for families. This will call for financial and training resources from society.
- Basic and supplementary training for health care, social welfare and teaching personnel should provide better preparedness for engagement with families, child-oriented and family-oriented approaches and broad-based cooperation with NGOs and other actors providing services for children and families.

## ***2. Employers should take more responsibility for family wellbeing***

In all its aspects, society should send out a clear message that it encourages the foundation of families and accepts responsibility for children's upbringing and family wellbeing. The social responsibility of employers should be encouraged in many ways in order to increase respect for family life and boost the potential for family wellbeing. Recognizing the needs of the child and of family life is part of good human resource policy and is a competitive asset for companies striving to improve their public image.

- The Government should get legislation passed to promote the wellbeing of children and families and ensure that the child and family perspective is taken into account in tripartite incomes policy talks.
- The Government and social partners should purposefully encourage and increase use of paternity leave and other family leaves.
- The Government should investigate ways of extending the length of the present parental leave so as to give both parents the chance to care for a child up to the age of one year.
- The social partners can help to increase respect for families and promote the reconciliation of work and family life by rewarding employers and companies whose human resources policy takes the family lives of employees into account.
- Social responsibility programmes in the business world should give as much weight to family life as to environmental factors and other ethical accountability.
- Various flexitime systems and short working hour options should be widely used at workplaces, to give families more time to be together. Parents should also have the chance to attend meetings on health care, social welfare and education matters held during the working day.

- In order to further flexibility in working life, a long-term plan is needed to which the social partners will commit. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and Ministry of Labour should coordinate findings and experiences from related development projects as a basis for comprehensive social debate.
- There must be effective action to reduce unemployment and short fixed-term contracts. This will encourage people to start a family and improve income security in families with children. Central and local government employers should act as the model for employers in other sectors.

### ***3. Interests of the child primary in practice as well as theory when decisions are made about child care and taking children into custody***

A child must have the right to secure human relationships even if his or her parents get divorced. It is not in the child's interests for the parents to quarrel about custody and access arrangements. Protracted disputes are particularly damaging. It is also not in the child's interests to be moved from place to place supposedly for his or her own welfare, as the child's right to secure emotional relationships must be safeguarded.

- Municipalities should ensure that families have access to professional conciliation services if they need them and, in divorce situations, to psychosocial support.
- When decisions are made on a child's custody and access rights, the child's interests must be taken into account and his or her welfare safeguarded. In the case of divorce, social services must help the parents to cooperate in safeguarding the child's position.
- The duration of disputes over custody should be reduced by speeding up processing by the social welfare authorities, rationalizing court hearings of cases and considering the setting of fixed periods for the various stages of the overall procedure.
- When the Child Welfare Act is amended, solutions should be sought that safeguard the child's long-lasting emotional and human relationships better than at present. Placement of a child should always be considered with great care, and should correspond to the child's needs.

#### **4. Sense of community and caring in the child's life**

A child's sense of community is shaped in everyday human relationships. The loving care of parents and other familiar adults and an immediate environment that cares about the child are the best soil in which a sense of community can grow. Today, many factors may complicate this process. The most typical are disintegration of the family and new types of family, different homes and constant changes in relationships at daycare centres and schools. Children need to be surrounded by adults who care about them and give them a feeling of security. Society must create structures and opportunities for a wide range of interaction between children and adults and for lasting human relationships. Such action to promote linkage and integration into the community are particularly important in the case of Roma and immigrant children and those in other minority groups.

- Daycare centres and schools must ensure that their children can form lasting peer groups, and there should be minimal turnover of carers and teachers. In situations of change, allowance must be made for the child's feelings and discussion of them. Jointly built traditions can help children to accept change and adjust to it.
- Because of the enhanced need for security among the children in their care, child welfare units should pay special attention to the formation of secure and lasting emotional relationships.
- Teaching in the upper classes of comprehensive school should include components that develop a sense of responsibility and participation. Voluntary work and collaboration between the school and its immediate environment should be able to offer adolescents activities in which their work and skills benefit both the young people themselves and the community. NGOs provide opportunities for building interaction and a sense of community, and these should be actively utilized.
- Housing policy should encourage cross-generational housing arrangements and provide options in which different generations can live in close proximity. This allows families with children to maintain social networks and furthers successful care arrangements, as well as ensuring that help is available when problems arise.

### **5. More media responsibility for child security**

Various forms of the media are strongly to the fore in children's everyday lives these days. Parents and other carers are particularly concerned about the potentially harmful images of sex and violence transmitted by the media to children. Children are interested in the Internet and other media technology. They learn to use the technology easily, but do not always understand the content and significance of what is transmitted, or its implicit values. Responsibility for protecting the child's psyche and raising him or her to be a competent and critical media user rests not only with parents but also to a substantial degree with the media industry itself and many other sectors of society. The information society should be given more responsibility for taking children's needs into account and respecting their dignity.

- The child should be protected from harmful advertising and violence, particularly on the Internet and in mobile phone services. In the media business, the interests of the child sometimes also call for restrictions.
- Media education should be developed and provided in early childhood education and care, comprehensive school and vocational institutions, and in recreational and leisure services for adolescents. Professionals working with children should be given skills in media education in their basic training. Parents should get information about media protection and education for children.
- In their operations and service provision, the media should show social and ethical responsibility.
- The Government should work actively in international cooperation to create standards for the media that protect children.

### **6. Towards systematic long-term child and family policy**

Finland needs a comprehensive and broadly approved national child and family policy strategy that will develop and monitor the wellbeing of children and families with children. This should ensure realization of the child's interests and needs and safeguard services and financial resources for families. The strategy would also point the way for national development projects in various sectors.

- The national strategy should include a section on child policy based on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, a section on family policy aimed at safeguarding the livelihood of families, and a

section on welfare and services for children and families. The family policy strategy should comprise a comprehensive programme on children and families. The Ministry of Social Affairs and Health programme of family policy targets should also incorporate the above-mentioned sections.

- The Ombudsman for Children will play a central role in national child and family policy and in ensuring its integration into the Government Programme. The Ombudsman's function is to ensure that society implements a long-range policy on children and families.
- The results of national development projects must be utilized when the service system for families with children is reformed, and should also be available for use in carer and teacher training and in practical work.
- Development work should improve the quality of basic services and strengthen cooperation between the various actors involved at the municipal and sub-regional level. In addition, development work and financial resources should be targeted at the most vulnerable children and families.

## ***7. The wellbeing of children and adolescents needs monitoring***

If child and family policy is to be well planned, implementation effective and monitoring regular, up-to-date data on services and the wellbeing of children and adolescents must be available.

- Statistics Finland should set up a nationwide system for compiling data to provide information on the wellbeing of children, adolescents and families with children and on service availability, and this should permit regional and international comparison also in time sequences. Linked to this should be a barometer that reflects the views of children and adolescents.
- The Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health and STAKES should support work on related policies undertaken by municipalities and sub-regions and the implementation and assessment of individual programmes.
- A set of criteria to monitor wellbeing must be formulated for the use of municipalities. The STAKES indicator database should be further developed.

## **8. Child impact assessment needed in public decision-making**

Most of society's decisions affect the lives of children. The UN Committee puts forward a model (page 34 of the Plan of Action) for assessing this impact, and this should be further developed. Impact assessment is in the interests of the child and should be carried out with reference to every decision affecting children. Listening to and taking account of the views of children in accordance with their age and maturity is a crucial part of such impact assessment.

- Before all decisions affecting the life of children are made, their impact on the child must be assessed. The decision-making authority involved would be responsible for the assessment.
- The proposed model for impact assessment should be tested and further developed. It could be used for instance to assess the effects of the alcohol tax reform on children and adolescents. The Committee suggests that further development of the assessment model and expansion of its application should be assigned to STAKES.

## **9. More opportunities for participation by children and adolescents**

Research and children's own experience tells us that rights of participation by children and adolescents are poorly realized in Finnish society, often because of adult attitudes that influence their opportunities for such participation. These opportunities must be improved at all levels of society.

- Plans for early childhood education and care, school curricula and the whole operating culture in care, upbringing and teaching must offer real chances for children to participate. The realization of participation in daycare, pre-school and schools must be monitored and assessed jointly by authorities and organizations on a regular basis.
- Procedures must be developed for putting children's knowledge and views to use when concrete social decisions affecting children are being planned. The expertise of children must specifically be utilized when home and school environments are planned and improved.
- Procedures must also be developed for reliably establishing and expressing the views of children in legal disputes concerning them. Courts must have enough expertise to be able to judge what is in the child's interests. Judges and social workers must be given related training at both the basic and supplementary level.



## **10. *A communication strategy for increasing awareness of the rights of the child***

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child requires States Parties to bring the principles and provisions of the Convention to the knowledge of both adults and children in an effective and active way. The Finnish Government must intensify its efforts to improve general knowledge about the Convention. The recent Act on the Ombudsman for Children<sup>2</sup> states that information provisions and other action to promote implementation of the Convention is an important function of the Ombudsman for Children.

- In order to increase information provision concerning the Convention, the Ombudsman for Children should draw up a proposal for a nationwide communication strategy for presentation to the Government.
- Children should be given information about their rights in a suitable manner.

## **11. *The child's perspective in development cooperation***

Some 85% of the world's children live in developing countries. In the least developed countries about half the population are under 18, compared with 22% in prosperous OECD countries. It is therefore justified to give the child's interests and rights a prominent place in development cooperation and other international collaboration.

Article 4 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child requires States Parties to take all relevant action to realize the rights identified in the Convention. States Parties must embark on measures to the maximum extent of their available resources and, where needed, within the framework of international cooperation.

- Finland must accept its responsibility and raise its budgeted development cooperation appropriation to 0.7% of GDP. Development cooperation must emphasize projects to promote children's wellbeing.
- Finland must take the obligations of the Convention on the Rights of the Child into account in the political strategy behind its development cooperation. The interests of the child must also be given priority as a recipient of aid.
- Impact on children must be monitored and assessed in development cooperation work as elsewhere.

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<sup>2</sup> Act on the Ombudsman for Children (1221/2004).

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[www.unicef.fi](http://www.unicef.fi)

***UN Convention on the Rights of the Child***  
***Summary of contents***

- Article 1: Everyone under the age of 18 is a child.
- Article 2: Child's right not to be discriminated against.
- Article 3: Child's right to have his/her rights made a primary consideration in all matters concerning him/her.
- Article 4: State Party's obligations regarding application of the Convention.
- Article 5: Parents' responsibilities, rights and duties, and state guidance.
- Article 6: Child's right to life, survival and development.
- Article 7: Child's right to registration after birth and right to a name and nationality.
- Article 8: Child's right to preserve his or her identity.
- Article 9: Child's right not to be separated from the parents.
- Article 10: Child's right to positive, humane and expeditious treatment by authorities responsible for family reunification.
- Article 11: State Party's obligations to combat the illicit transfer of children abroad and their non-return.
- Article 12: Child's right to express personal views and have them given due weight in accordance with his/her age and maturity.
- Article 13: Child's right to freedom of expression.
- Article 14: Child's right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.
- Article 15: Child's right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly.
- Article 16: Child's right to freedom from interference or attack.
- Article 17: Child's right of access to proper information via the media.
- Article 18: Duties and responsibilities of child's parents/guardians, right to daycare and other services for families with children.
- Article 19: Child's right to physical and mental integrity.
- Article 20: Child's right to alternative care.
- Article 21: Adoption in the best interests of the child.
- Article 22: Rights of the refugee child.
- Article 23: Rights of the disabled child.
- Article 24: Child's right to health care.
- Article 25: State Party's obligation to periodically review the circumstances of a child in alternative care.
- Article 26: Child's right to social security.
- Article 27: Child's right to adequate living standards.
- Article 28: Child's right to education, which must be compulsory and free.

- Article 29: State Party's obligation to take into account the targets for education set down in the Article.
- Article 30: Rights of children of indigenous peoples and minorities.
- Article 31: Child's right to rest, leisure and play.
- Article 32: Child's right to be protected against economic exploitation.
- Article 33: Child's right to protection against the illicit use of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances.
- Article 34: Child's right to protection against sexual exploitation (see Optional Protocol on trafficking in children, child prostitution and child pornography).
- Article 35: States Parties must combat trading in children.
- Article 36: Child's right to be protected against all other forms of exploitation.
- Article 37: Child's right to protection against torture and inhuman punishment. Child must not be subject to capital punishment or life imprisonment.
- Article 38: Child's right to protection from being used as a combatant in armed conflicts (see Optional Protocol).
- Article 39: Right of a child who has been the victim of abuse to physical and psychological recovery and social reintegration.
- Article 40: Right of a child found guilty of a crime to protection and social reintegration.
- Article 41: State's responsibility to comply with its own laws if they are better for the child.
- Article 42: State's responsibility to get the Convention more widely known.
- Article 43: UN Committee on the Rights of the Child to examine the progress made by States Parties in achieving realization of the obligations laid down in the Convention.
- Articles 44-45: State's responsibility to report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child on implementation of the Convention.
- Articles 46-54: Decisions on the period of validity of the Convention.

### ***Children's Parliament and Open Youth Forum in Tampere***

It is the aim of the Children's Parliament to give Tampere children and adolescents the chance to participate in and influence the development of their own daycare centres, schools, housing areas and home city.

The Lasten Tampere association obtained funding from the Ministry of Education, the Slot Machine Association and the City of Tampere which it used to launch a project called LOVE [the initial letters of the Finnish name of the project] in spring 2001. The aim of LOVE was to develop models and practices to further participation and influence by children and adolescents at daycare centres, schools and youth facilities, and to develop the operations of the Tampere Children's Parliament and Open Youth Forum in accordance with the City's child policy programme.

The Children's Parliament was integrated into the City's cultural services section at the beginning of 2004, and is run by a youth services officer. The Finnish Children's Parliament is a follow-up to the Tampere Children's Parliament. The Ministry of Education supports the work of the related association and aims to sponsor activities on the Tampere model elsewhere in Finland.

A progressive operating model representing all Tampere children was set up for the Tampere Children's Parliament. The Parliament has an elected body of 58 representatives of all 6th and 7th graders at Tampere comprehensive schools, one from each school. Deputy representatives are elected from among 5th and 7th graders. There is one representative from each comprehensive school, 58 in all. Each new elected body includes a quota of representatives from the previous body, who pass on their know-how to the new representatives and thus ensure continuity. Representatives sit for two years. Children's Parliament elections are arranged jointly at the schools by the Board of the Children's Parliament and the City's youth services. In autumn 2003, Tampere schools put up altogether 748 candidates for election.

In future the aim is to rationalize operations by altering the age range to 1st to 6th graders. This is a more sensible arrangement because a pupil's will often go to a different school or a different building when transferring to 7th grade. The change will make 7th graders members of the Open Youth Forum instead. The change-over should take place by the end of 2005.

The Parliament meets twice a year in the City Council chamber. There is a Board which chooses what it considers the most important Committees. In 2004, there were four such Committees: schools, information, leisure and city

planning. Both the Board and the Committees meet about once a month. Informal working groups can also be formed for various purposes.

The most important function of the Open Youth Forum is to influence matters related to the lives and happiness of adolescents. It monitors decision-making affecting young people and puts forward its own initiatives on matters it considers important. The Open Youth Forum aims to act as a channel of participation for adolescents in the 8th grade and above. By the end of 2005, operations will be extended to 7th graders as explained above.

The Open Youth Forum arranges a general assembly twice a year to which two representatives are freely elected from every school with 7th-10th graders, and every senior secondary school and vocational institution. The Forum has a Board and Committees for information, schools, city planning, and cultural and leisure activities. There is also an events group, mainly responsible for musical events. Over 30 adolescents made up the Board and Committees at the beginning of 2004. The Committees and the events group are chosen from all 8th graders and above (from the beginning of 2006, 7th graders and above). Members are not required to be general assembly representatives.

The Open Youth Forum's initiatives to the City have covered matters such as providing more facilities for bands, opening a youth café, and having the right to attend and speak at meetings of City Committees. The Open Youth Forum also arranges various events, including the Tampere Phenomenon band competition and Piece of Dance contest for young dance pairs. The Forum gets backing from the youth services, which come under the City's cultural section.

At the sub-regional level, collaboration between young people is represented by the Pirkanmaa Idea Forum, where representatives of youth councils or similar bodies in the greater Tampere area meet a couple of times a year to consider opportunities for participation in the area and to pass on information among adolescents from various municipalities. Representatives of the Open Youth Forum also work actively in an association called Nuoret Vaikuttajat, which arranges an annual meeting of hundreds of young activists from all over Finland called NUPPI. This deals with various participation-related issues.

***Checklist for assessing the realization of children's rights***

The Implementation Handbook for the Convention for the Rights of the Child, "Making the Convention Widely Known" (UNICEF 2002) contains a checklist which can be used to help assess national realization of Article 42 of the Convention. The questions on the list include the following:

- Have the authorities responsible for implementation of the Article been specified and their activities coordinated?
- Which are the most important NGOs relevant for application of the Article?
- Are the legislation, policy and practice overall in harmony with the Article, and do they apply to all children and all sub-areas of the legislation?
- Have targets and assessment mechanisms been set up for implementation of the Article?
- Have sufficient budget resources been allocated to implementation of the Article?
- Has the State Party embarked on active measures to get the Convention widely known among adults/children?
- Are the Convention and information about its significance incorporated into the curricula of all schools/other educational institutions?
- Has the State Party arranged for vocational and continuing education on the Convention for judges, lawyers, law officers, penal institution personnel, immigration authorities, military personnel and UN peacekeepers, teachers, social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists working with families and children, staff of child custody institutions, health care personnel, officials and decision-makers, assessors and persons responsible for compiling data, and other adults working with children?
- Have mass media, relevant organizations and civil society, and children's groups been involved in disseminating information about the Convention?
- Has training on the Convention been arranged for the personnel of the media and bodies engaged in publication work?
- Has the State Party had interview surveys done to establish how well the Convention is known among the general public, those working with children, and children themselves?